



Short Stories III. from
Pearson's and other
Magazines by Mrs. L. T.
Meade & Robert Eustace

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AN ILLUSTRATED MONTHLY

Short Stories III. by Mrs. L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace
Cassell's Magazine, Pearson's Magazine & Frank Leslie's Monthly

In the Thick of the Fight I: Matthew Gray's Wife – Cassell's Magazine, February 1896 [by Mrs. L. T. Meade]

In the Thick of the Fight, II: The Heart of Victoria – Cassell's Magazine, May 1896 [by Mrs. L. T. Meade]

In the Thick of the Fight, III: The Diamond Crescent – Cassell's Magazine, August 1896 [by Mrs. L. T. Meade]

The Dead Hand - Pearson's Magazine, February 1902 [by Mrs. L. T. Meade & Robert Eustace]

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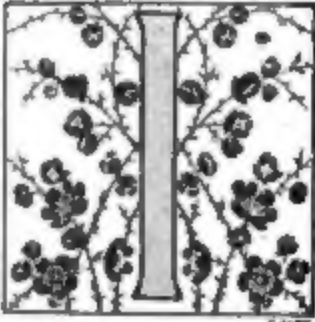
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IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT.

BY L. T. MEADE.

STORY I.—MATTHEW GRAY'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.



IT was the night of the weekly debate at the Vanguard Club for Women, when Matthew Gray determined to put his fortunes to the test. The subject of the debate this evening was "Woman," and the opener was a man. When Matthew made his way into the crowded room the speaking had already begun. He was a young man of about twenty-six years of age, and had been a journalist from the time he was twenty. He had done well in journalism as he did in everything else he undertook, and six months ago had published his first novel. This novel had proved an unusual success—it had hit the caprice of the hour, being out of the common without being too much so—it appealed to popular taste, and soothed rather than irritated public opinion. Matthew suddenly found himself on the high road both to fame and opulence. Orders for future works began to pour in—fortune smiled brightly, in short, he felt himself entitled to try for the dearest wish of his life and to ask Diana Harrington to become his wife. She had invited him as a guest to the Vanguard Club, and he now listened to the fluent speech of the man who had opened the debate with a certain amused attention—he noticed the ill-concealed impatience of some of the audience—he observed that the speaker was giving forth a string of platitudes on the duties of wives and mothers—he agreed with all that was said, for in his heart of hearts he hated the so-called advanced woman, but wished that the matter might be put more concisely, and, if possible, with words more likely to arrest attention and demand respect. Matthew felt sure that he could have spoken better, he was elated and full of hope about everything to-night—his book was on the eve of going into a fifth edition—all the world therefore smiled upon him in short, his success almost intoxicated him. His bright eyes watched her as she sat with the rest of the committee—he quickly made up his mind that he would ask her the vital question before the night was over.

The speaker on the platform sat down at last amid murmurs other than those of

applause. Directly he did so a slim girl, with dark hair and eyes, full of suppressed emotion, sprang to her feet. Matthew drew a step nearer and watched her attentively. She wore the simplest of dresses, slightly open at her neck and wrist—her hair was arranged low down on her neck, she looked the essence of all that was feminine—the young man's heart was stirred within him. Would Diana support the views of the last speaker? Her terse clear voice smote almost sharply on his ear. Diana was, without doubt, a vigorous fighter—she intended now to fight for her sisters and for herself. She spoke softly, scarcely raising her voice, but her eyes were full of fire, her voice rang with delicate scorn, and when her speech was finished the whole room was in an uproar of applause.

The debate came to an end, and Diana came straight up to where Gray was standing.

"I am so glad you were able to come," she said, "did I do it well? What do you think of it all?"

"You looked splendid," said Gray, smiling into her eyes.

"Oh! what did my looks matter?" she gave him a glance half of impatience. "Did I say anything to help the Woman's Cause?"

"You are an earnest and true woman yourself," he answered. "I don't quite agree with you—but forgive me, I don't want to go into that subject to-night. I am selfish, I wish to talk to you about myself."

"Well, come down and have some coffee. Ah! there is Mr. Raymond—I must speak to him; and I should like to introduce you. He is the man who opened the debate."

"Here you are," she continued, as Raymond approached her side. "Let me introduce my friend Mr. Gray. Of course you know each other by repute," she added, her bright eyes sparkling; "one edits the *Hyde Park Gazette*, the other has written a book."

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance," said Raymond to Gray. "I have just read your book—'The Shadow of the Duke'—it is about the most original thing which has appeared in the market for a long time, carrying one back into the Middle Ages, and yet having a delicious touch of modernity about it."

Gray murmured something in response—it was nice to hear his book praised, but he did not want to lose sight of Diana.

"Come down, both of you," she said, "and let me give you coffee."

"You have not forgotten, Miss Harrington, that you are coming to supper with my sister and me to-night," said Raymond.

"I was going to ask you to excuse me," she replied; "I have a stupid headache."

There was quite a crush on the stairs, and Raymond was forced to go on in front.

"I want to say something to you; do give me a chance to-night," said Gray in Diana's ears.

Something in his tone caused her to look at him; her eyes were full of a soft, beautiful light; they fell beneath his; the colour rose higher on her cheek.

"I know a corner in the coffee-room where we can be alone," she said in a semi-whisper. "Ah! here we are at the door; let us make straight for it."

They threaded their way through the crowded room, and at last found themselves standing behind a little table which screened them from the rest of the crowd. Several men were present, and the women of the club were all eagerly entertaining their guests.

"What a babel of sound!" said Gray. "Do you really come here every night?"

"Yes, I delight in it. I never enjoyed myself so much as since I joined the Vanguard."

"But some of those women! See how they dress!" Gray glanced as he spoke in the direction of a tall lady with short hair, the upper part of whose figure could not have been told from that of a man.

"Oh! the dress happens to be her little weakness," said Diana. "I detest that sort of dress myself, but she fancies it. Why should she be abused for it? You don't know what a noble soul she is. Shall I tell you her history?"

"Not now; I have something to say to you myself."

"Yes," she said, looking full up into his face.

"Something to say about myself and about you," he continued, speaking in a husky voice. "Diana, you hold all my future in your hands. I consider myself at this moment successful, but I shall be the greatest failure that ever lived, if you refuse the request I am going to make to you."

She did not reply, her eyes sought the ground, her firm, pretty delicately cut lips trembled slightly.

"You know, you must know, what I feel for you," he said. "I love you with all my heart. Will you be my wife, Diana? I can afford to marry now. Will you say 'yes'?"

"Yes, Matthew," she replied, looking full up into his face and speaking with simple directness; then she blushed, and her lips

faltered. "I am not to be one of the million women left outside the pale of happy wives," she said in a broken voice. "I am very glad."

"I knew you were a true woman, my darling," said Matthew; "you have made me the happiest man in the world."

Raymond came up at that moment.

"Won't you offer me some coffee?" he said to Diana.

She controlled her emotion in an instant, and turned a bright smiling face towards him.

"How rude I am!" she said. "Have a cup, won't you? I don't know if we can find seats. How full the room is!"

"I wish you would reconsider your decision," said Raymond, coming nearer to her; "surely this hot air is bad for your head. My carriage will be round directly, and Esther will be so disappointed."

"Oh! I'll come if you wish," she answered; she felt too happy at this moment to refuse any request made of her.

Matthew stood near, but did not speak—his cup of bliss was perfectly full—he was now quite indifferent to anything Raymond might happen to say to Diana.

A few moments later Miss Harrington found herself driving to Hugh Raymond's flat in Winsley Gardens in his perfectly appointed brougham.

"I thought Esther was with you," she said, as she stepped into the carriage.

"No; she went on first and begged of us to follow; some other friends are coming, and she had one or two things to see to. The fact is," he added, as the carriage rolled smoothly along, "I asked her to go; I wanted to see you for a moment by yourself."

"Yes," said Diana, turning round and glancing at him.

"You must know what has been in my heart for a long time, Miss Harrington," he continued, speaking almost nervously; "I have the highest respect for women. I prove it by earnestly desiring to make one woman my wife. I have loved you for a long time, will you——?"

"Oh! don't," said Diana.

"Why do you say that? Why do you interrupt me?"

"Because you have said too much, and I ought not to listen to you. Marriage without love would be impossible to me. I don't love you. I never should have loved you. I respect you, and you are kind, but love I could never give you."

"Are you sure?" he interrupted her, bending forward and speaking with eagerness.

"You must hear me out," she said; "there is something further to say. Half an hour ago I engaged myself to another man."

Raymond suddenly subsided into his seat.

"You need not tell me his name," he said. "I know him."

"Do you? You can only know him slightly. I introduced you to each other to-night. I am proud to tell you that I am now the affianced wife of Matthew Gray."

"This is the second time that man has done me an injury," muttered Raymond, speaking half under his breath, but Diana heard him.

CHAPTER II.

A MONTH later Diana was married.

There was no reason why her wedding should be delayed. Matthew could afford to take a nice little flat in the neighbourhood of Hyde Park. He could afford to furnish it daintily and to bring his bride to as pretty a set of rooms as any modern girl could desire. Matthew himself was intensely modern in his writing, and, as far as superficial observers could tell, in his opinions, but as regarded women

—and in especial—married women, he was strictly conservative. Diana was to find that out by-and-by; she had little idea of it when she promised to be his wife. She was naturally a very affectionate, true-hearted girl, and the life which now opened before her seemed full of attractions. She made a beautiful bride, and on their honeymoon no couple could be happier than the Grays. It was on the night of their return home that the little rift became perceptible. They were standing in their pretty, bright drawing-room, and Gray had his arm round his wife's slim waist.

"Now you will be as happy as the day is long," he said.

"I am sure of it," she answered; "my life will be full—full to the brim."

"Of course it will, dearest. To tell you the truth, Diana, I could never have married a wife without intellect. You will help me immensely with my books—I mean to make you my proof reader, you will also be my most valued critic. We can do proof reading when we are at home in the evenings—but, of course, we will also go out together, I have several friends I want you to get acquainted with."

"Yes, dear,"

she answered, moving rather restlessly as she spoke. "Oh! by the way, I found a letter from Esther Raymond waiting for me amongst others in my sweet little boudoir—she wants to know if I will open a debate at the Vanguard to-morrow evening—the subject is to be 'Brave Women and Fair Men'—it is just like Esther to take up that modern note. Why, what is the matter, Matthew?—you have got quite an unbecoming frown between your brows."

Gray smoothed away the obnoxious expression.

"I was wondering if you would do something for me, darling," he said, after a pause.

"Why, of course—how can you ask in that doubtful sort of voice? You know I would do anything in the world for you."

"Perhaps, Di, you won't quite like to do this. I want you to withdraw from the Vanguard Club."

Diana opened her dark eyes very wide.

"My dear Matthew," she exclaimed; "what in the world do you mean?"

"What I say, my love," he stooped as he spoke and poked the fire irritably; "the fact is, Diana, I hate women's clubs—they may be necessary for some women, but surely a



"DID I DO IT WELL?" (A. 204).

young wife need not mix herself up with such a set."

"Such a set," echoed Diana; "my noblest and warmest and best friends belong to it."

"Well, darling, you can ask them here—anyone you like will be abundantly welcome here—but why go to the club now?"

"Only that I am deeply interested in it, Mat; my heart is with those women and with their cause; you do not surely mean what you say—you don't lay this on me as a command?"

"Not I—I won't command you in anything—it is a wish of mine, but if it troubles you I won't say anything more about it. I will leave it to your own good sense, darling."

"Now, that is quite horrid of you. I would fifty times rather you blew me up. The fact is, my dear old boy, I do not feel it possible to gratify your wishes in this particular."

"Very well, Diana—don't let us spoil our very first evening at home by talking any more on the matter."

"Of course not," she answered brightly, and yet with an obstinate line round her lips. "Ah! there's our supper gong—how delicious to have supper all alone with you in our own house."

Gray said something nice, but he said it with an effort—there was a slight restraint between the pair as they sat down to their first meal at home.

Matthew went out early the next morning to see his publishers, and Diana was alone in her pretty new home. Instead of unpacking her things and making herself generally active and useful, she sat by the fire and with a frown between her pretty brows, drew a letter out of her pocket. The letter was from her dressmaker, with a request that Mrs. Gray would send her a cheque for the enclosed amount, at her very earliest convenience. Diana glanced at the sum total with a slight shiver. She had been running up bills with her dressmaker for some time previous to her engagement—she had a bill also with her milliner. In short, this apparently immaculate young lady was in debt to the tune of very nearly two hundred pounds. She could scarcely tell even now how the debts had begun, but she knew very well how they had crept up and up until she was frightened at their proportions—she knew how they weighed upon her spirits and alarmed her even in her happiest moments. When she was first engaged to Matthew she firmly resolved not to marry until the debts were paid, but it was impossible to be a bride without a trousseau, and although Diana's trousseau was an essentially modest one, it considerably increased her bills. Her modest

earnings, for she had supported herself by journalistic work for two or three years, were quite inadequate to meet these heavy demands, and, in short, she became a bride with a secret which she dared not unburden to her husband.

"I will never tell my husband," she said, speaking half aloud as was her wont. "I vow and declare that I will earn the money myself. I won't let my dear Matthew pay these horrid bills for dresses and capes and gloves and bonnets which I wore out and hated before he proposed to me, for all the world. Yes, I must find some way of earning the money. What shall I do. In the whirl of my brief engagement I almost forgot those odious debts, but now something must be sent to Madame Lefroy. I will write her a little note and enclose—let me see, how much have I in my purse?" Diana opened her pretty little sealskin purse—it contained something over five pounds.

"I will send her five pounds—that will keep her quiet for a month or so," she thought.

She went to her desk and wrote a few lines, and then, putting on her hat, went to the nearest post office to get postal orders for the amount. These were enclosed to Madame Lefroy, and the young bride heaved a sigh of relief.

"She will wait at least for a month now," she thought to herself, "and by that time I shall be earning something. How I wish Mr. Raymond would give me a post on the *Hyde Park Gazette*; he half promised to once, but I daren't ask him favours now. Dear old Matthew—to think of a man like Hugh Raymond presuming to ask me to marry him—and yet he is rich and Matthew is not really rich; he is just successful, and we shall get along very nicely, but I could not ask him to give me two hundred pounds and to ask me no questions why I wanted it, and I do not fancy I should greatly mind asking Hugh Raymond for that modest little sum if I happened to be his wife. Hugh has not a high ideal of women—but Matthew! he thinks I am a princess—a white angel, somebody immaculate without even the stain of a passing weakness. He shall never, never know that I was vain enough to go in debt for pretty clothes. Dear old fellow, how much I love him—who would have supposed, though, that he was so narrow-minded? Fancy his wanting me to give up the *Vanguard*! That I can never do. I must bring him round to my views—that will be noble work—how splendidly Matthew could help the cause of woman, if only he would throw his soul into the matter."

Diana's mind was now considerably

relieved, and she spent the rest of the day happily enough. Her husband came home to lunch, and brought her good news from his publishers. His novel was still the rage of the season: it was rapidly passing from one edition to another; a cheap edition was now in contemplation, and certain corrections for this were necessary.

"I must do it to-night, Di," said Matthew, "for the public must have the edition by next week, so I am greatly afraid I shall not be able to take you to the play as I promised, dearest."

"Oh, it doesn't matter, Mat," she answered, "for you know this is the night of the debate at the Vanguard; and although, acceding to your wish, I am not going to take an active part in the proceedings, I shall of course like to be there."

"But you cannot come back alone."

"I have done so hundreds of times already—why should I mind it to-night?"

"I will call for you, Diana, when the debate is over," said Gray, speaking with a certain stiffness. "I cannot prevent my wife going to her own club, but I insist on her not walking through the streets of London alone after dusk."

"Oh, Mat, Mat, how you will spoil me!" she replied. She spoke lightly, but she was conscious of a little sense of irritation—her silken chains began to fret her.

When Mrs. Gray, looking radiant in one of her pretty bridal dresses, appeared amongst the members of the committee that night at the Vanguard Club, she was received with quite a little ovation.

"So glad you are back again," one member after another whispered to her.

"How well you look, and how happy!" said others; but others, again, twitted her on her state of slavery, and asked her what she now thought about the matrimonial condition.

"The best and happiest in the world," was her quick response; and then gently freeing herself from her tormentors, she went down into the body of the room and sat by her friend, Esther Raymond.

"I am so delighted to see you again, Di," whispered Esther. "I quite hoped you would be here to-night; but, my dear, why did you not lead the debate?—we were all so anxious to hear you."

"I was not prepared," said Di, lightly. "I had such a jolly honeymoon that perhaps my weapons of repartee and sarcasm and argument have grown a little rusty."

"Well, another time you shall do it. You certainly do look remarkably well. I told Hugh that you were likely to be here, and he said he would drop in."

Esther looked markedly at Diana, who coloured faintly.

"He asked me to coax you to come back to supper," continued Esther.

"Oh, I cannot do that," replied Mrs. Gray, "my husband is coming for me."

"Well, what of that? We shall be very pleased to see him also."

"He is too busy, Esther; a cheap edition of 'The Shadow of the Duke' is coming out next week, and every moment of Matthew's time is occupied getting it through the press."

"What it is to be famous!" said Esther; "I am sure I congratulate you; and certainly Mr. Gray is a very distinguished-looking man. I only hope he won't narrow your views, Diana; you must be very careful on that score."

"Trust me," answered Diana; "you know I am heart and soul in the cause."

"What a pretty gown you are wearing," said Esther; "where did you get it?"

"Madame Lefroy made it for me," replied Mrs. Gray. Her brow fell as she spoke—she had forgotten that horrid nightmare of debt, but now it returned with overbearing force.

"By the way, Esther," she said, "I am really glad your brother is coming, for I want to speak to him on a most particular subject."

"Well, here he is; let us go to him before he is snapped up. Ah, he sees us."

Hugh Raymond made his way across the room. A moment later his hand clasped Diana's with a slight lingering pressure, which in her heart of hearts she resented. The thought of her horrible debt, however, made her inclined to be friendly, and when Esther whispered to her tall brother that Mrs. Gray had something very special to say to him, she found herself the next moment walking by his side downstairs to coffee.

It seemed but yesterday that she had walked downstairs by Gray's side on the beautiful blissful night when he had asked her to be his wife. Now she was a wife, the wedding was over, the honeymoon was past, she was the happiest woman in the world; but why did her heart beat and her lips tremble as she looked up at Hugh Raymond's smooth, dark, somewhat sinister cast of face?

"You know I shall be only too pleased to do anything for you," he said. "I am flattered at your wanting to confide in me—the fact of such a devoted young wife having confidences to make is in itself flattering—you may be quite sure that I shall not betray them."

Diana found herself blushing uncomfortably.

"I want to ask you a great favour," she

said boldly. "You know that in my opinion both husband and wife should help to contribute to the common purse."

"Come, that's rank heresy," said Raymond. "I know for a fact those are not Gray's views."

"That is just it," said Diana; "dear old fellow, he is so chivalrous; but, Mr. Raymond, I want to earn money—I must earn money—and if—oh! if you could get me a post on the *Hyde Park Gazette*."

"Now that is very strange," said Raymond, "it was only this morning I was wondering who could take Miss Schofield's place on the woman's column."

"Oh, is there a vacancy?" said Diana, eagerly. "If there is, and if——"

"If I give it to you will you be able to fill it ably?" asked Raymond, giving her a piercing glance.

"I think so—I believe so."

"You have done good work, I know," he said; for the moment he ceased to look at her with admiration and was the keen man of business. "The fact is, the *Hyde Park Gazette* likes to be a little bit scandalous, it rather builds its reputation on that; we like choice morsels and bits of out-of-the-way gossip—the woman's column has, in short, to get behind the scenes. I can afford to pay well for really valuable services. Here are two vacant seats, for a wonder; let us sit down and discuss the matter."

The discussion was quickly over. When Gray arrived to fetch his wife home, she had accepted an engagement to write a weekly article for the *Hyde Park Gazette*, with a salary of two hundred pounds a year.

"You will tell your husband, of course?" said Raymond, as he parted from her.

"I—I don't know," she answered, her eyes falling as she spoke.

"I only wanted to tell you that I will not mention it without your permission."

"Thank you," she said, but her heart was very low as she turned away.

CHAPTER III.

HUGH RAYMOND was an unscrupulous and successful man. The *Hyde Park Gazette* was his own property—he had made it pay—it supplied a certain want, but by no means the highest want of human nature. His woman's column was a feature in itself—it required skilful manipulation, and although it was ostensibly the work of a woman, he always superintended it, and always supplied himself the most highly-seasoned pieces of gossip and scandal which it contained.

He was not a man of much affection, but he had fallen passionately in love with Diana Harrington. When she married Matthew Gray, his love for her underwent a subtle change, it turned into active hatred of the man who had supplanted him. Hatred in such a nature as his quickly thinks of revenge, and on the night when Raymond arranged with Mrs. Gray to supply the woman's column of his paper, he also thought out a very subtle mode of action, which would make the wife



"IT SEEMED BUT YESTERDAY . . . HE HAD ASKED HER TO BE HIS WIFE."

his instrument for putting the husband to open ridicule, and if possible spoiling his career.

Gray had not only supplanted Raymond with regard to his wife, but years ago, when a young man, had secured a good post on one of the great dailies, which, but for his sudden appearance on the scene, would have been given to Raymond. Gray was now a leader writer on this same journal, but this fact was known only to a few. His caustic and brilliant writing was much admired, but even Diana herself had not the faintest idea that her husband wrote the words which she read morning after morning with sparkling eyes, sometimes of indignation, sometimes of admiration at their undoubted power. It was Gray's pleasure to keep this secret of his journalistic work even from his wife—his novel writing apparently occupied all his time, and Diana never questioned him about mysterious absences which took place almost nightly. He blessed her for this, not caring to appear before the public in a double capacity, and glad for many reasons to keep his incognito. He said to himself that he was the lucky possessor of a wife who was not cursed with Eve's curiosity—he did not guess, however, the true reason for Diana's apparent want of interest in the long hours which he spent from home. She was equally busy on her own account. Not for worlds would she let her husband know what she did day by day at the Vanguard Club. It was there she collected those choice morsels which so delighted Raymond, and so tickled the fancy of his many readers. It was there she worked up her articles into sprightly and readable English. It was from the Vanguard Club that she posted them weekly to the office of the *Hyde Park Gazette*. As a rule, she never read them in print. Had she done so she would not have recognised these papers for her own. With her many faults, and she had plenty, Diana's real nature was sweet and whole—she could not put on paper the venomous things which appeared week by week in the *Gazette*—this was Raymond's own office, it was he who turned the witty and brilliant article each week into gall. The gall was none too bitter for his readers, however, and Diana suspected nothing. She received her salary, and had the pleasure of feeling that her debts were sensibly diminishing.

One day, about six months after Diana had undertaken the post of editor of the woman's column on the *Hyde Park Gazette*, Raymond sent her a note asking her to call early at his office. It came by special messenger, and Gray happened to be with his wife when she received it. She coloured crimson and then grew deadly white.

"Anything wrong?" he asked of her in some surprise.

"No," she answered, "not exactly," then she looked boldly into his face. Come, what would, she could not lie to him.

"This is a note from Mr. Raymond," she said; "he begs of me to call at the *Hyde Park Gazette* this morning—you know I used to write paragraphs for his paper."

"So I have heard," answered Gray; "but if he wants you to begin anything of the kind again, Diana, you must say 'no.' I am earning more than enough for us both, and I do not choose you to do journalistic work."

"Why so?" she asked timidly. "The fact is I am particularly fond of writing."

"You may write a novel if you like, but paragraph writing is beneath you, and I cannot countenance it."

"All right," she said, after a pause; "but I think I will call, as Mr. Raymond has particularly requested me to do so."

"Certainly," answered Gray. "It is possible, Di, that I shall not be home until the small hours—if that is so, do not stay up for me."

She murmured something which he could not quite catch, and a moment later left the room.

In half an hour's time, Diana was ushered into the sanctum of the editor of the *Hyde Park Gazette*.

"Welcome," he said, when he saw her. "Now I want you to do something special for me. You have not begun your article for this week yet?"

"No; I generally collect my material on the first two days of the week and write my article in hot haste on Wednesday—it seems to come better so."

"Your papers are excellent," said Raymond, "you are a born journalist—you have caught the swing of the thing. This week, however, your woman's article must treat on a new topic. Have you observed these leaders in the *Morning Gazette*?"

"Oh! yes," said Diana, we take the *Morning Gazette*—do you mean the second leader—it seems to me to be always from the same pen."

"Undoubtedly," said Raymond; "the fact is I happen to know the writer."

"Do you? He must be a very clever man."

"He is, but—" Raymond bent forward, lowered his voice and said something in a semi-whisper.

"Impossible!" said Diana, reddening and starting back.

"It is true; the man is a confounded hypocrite; see the stand he takes; he is against all progress; he even quotes the highest sentiments. I know for a fact what I

am telling you," he lowered his voice again and whispered some further scandal. "Mrs. Gray," he said suddenly, "we must show him up."

"I hate hypocrites," said Diana.

"I know you do—I have always observed your uncompromising attitude towards the faintest touch of deceit. Now I will give you materials. Our column this week will surprise some people, or I am vastly mistaken. Make these leaders, which are attracting a great amount of public attention, your main subject—your one subject. Here, and here, and here" (he placed some newspaper cuttings in her hand), "use these, bring them in delicately with a woman's wit; let me have your article by to-night."

"You are sure of your statements, Mr. Raymond?" said Diana.

"Positive—but we must not implicate ourselves—we must only suggest. Oh! no one can do this better than you can. Now I think you quite understand."

Diana rose—she went as far as the door. As she did so a sudden remembrance of Gray's splendid face and upright figure rose before her; she remembered the look in his eyes when he said that he did not want her to do journalistic work. What would he feel if he ever knew the weekly work in which she was engaged?

"After all," she said, faltering; "I do not know that I much like this office—of course, if the man is what you say, it is only right to show him up, but why must I do it?—it is surely not my woman's mission."

"It is if you love your sisters and would advance your cause," said Raymond. "Such a case as I have just spoken of is enough to deaden all true woman's work in England. Hypocrites must be shown up if we are to achieve anything."

"Still the work is not quite mine," objected Diana.

"Very well, Mrs. Gray—perhaps you are tired of writing for the *Gazette*, if so——"

"Oh! no," said Diana hastily—she could not afford to lose her weekly salary—those dreadful debts must be cleared off first. Afterwards—"Afterwards I will summon courage and tell Matthew the whole truth," thought the unhappy girl.

She hurried off to the club, and went upstairs to the silence room—it was in this sanctum she generally wrote her papers. She carried in her portfolio that morning's copy of the *Morning Gazette*, she spread the cuttings from other newspapers before her and read them eagerly; soon her heart beat with anger. If this thing were true, if the man who dared to appear before the public using

lofty words and trying to crush some of the most popular of the woman's movements was really what Raymond thought him?

"I will show him up," thought Diana; "after all, my work is noble enough."

She wrote with spirit—never in her whole life had she written better—each word told. Her writing was almost epigrammatic in its force and terseness, she insinuated without condemning; she laid bare what looked like a nasty scandal without apparently lifting more than the outermost edge of the curtain. She spent the greater part of the day over her work, and before she went home to dinner it was finished and posted to the office of the *Hyde Park Gazette*. Raymond received it by the first post the following morning. He read it with sardonic glee, and, having emphasised and strengthened the more delicate insinuations, having, in short, boldly lifted the curtain which Diana had partly uncovered, he sent the article—in all a trenchant and remarkable one—to press.

"That will do my business," he said to himself. "Was ever revenge more delicately planned than mine?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE article caught on: it immediately excited public attention, and was quoted in the evening papers; the next day letters appeared about it, and the scandal grew and grew. On all hands people asked who was the man about whom these ugly things were whispered—that he was a great journalist, everyone knew; others had heard that he also wrote novels. Most of the members of the Vanguard Club knew that Diana wrote for the *Hyde Park Gazette*—they questioned her eagerly with regard to the subject of her article. When she said she did not know the name of the man she had maligned, the other women looked at her as if they did not believe her. The real truth, however, for the first day or two, was known to no one at the club.

Amongst Diana's friends was a certain Mrs. Musgrave—a very fine-natured woman, who supported herself and her three children by journalism—she read the article in the *Hyde Park Gazette*, but shook her head over it.

"I do not like it," she said, addressing one or two of her friends. "Mrs. Gray is too fine a woman, and has too noble a husband herself, to stoop to this sort of thing—she ought not to do it, and I wonder Mr. Gray allows her."

"Oh, come; if a woman cannot do what she pleases, she ought not to belong to the

Vanguard Club," said the member who was addressed.

Mrs. Musgrave sighed.

"It was my delight to obey my noble husband when I had him," she said; then she added, quickly suppressing herself, "but I wonder who this scandal is really about?"

She was soon to find out.

One morning, two or three days after the

"But no one could say evil of you, Matthew," she answered.

"All men have their enemies," he replied.

"By the way, Di, it is just possible that I may have to go to Paris to-night."

"What for?" she asked.

"Some business in connection with my work. If I go I will send you a telegram. Now, good-bye."



HE LOWERED HIS VOICE AGAIN AND WHISPERED SOME FURTHER SCANDAL." (p. 211).

article had appeared, Gray came down to breakfast with a worried expression on his face.

"Is anything the matter?" Diana asked of him.

"Nothing, really," he replied, "I am only bothered about a stupid thing which has got into the papers."

"Into the papers?" said Diana, opening her eyes wide; "surely nothing against you, Matthew?"

"Yes, my love: a scandalous falsehood has been circulated about me—of course, it is the work of an enemy. I have just the ghost of a suspicion from what quarter it may arise, and intend to crush it in the bud. Don't you fret yourself about it, darling."

He left her; she felt restless and uneasy, she could not tell why.

Late in the afternoon she went to the club. No telegram had yet been received from Matthew, and she hoped that he would not be obliged to go to Paris. Some ladies were sitting in the drawing-room, and Diana went there intending to take up a book and try to distract her thoughts. The moment she was seen, however, her friends surrounded her, and began to talk about her article in the *Hyde Park Gazette*.

"You are certainly on your way to fame," said one girl.

"Mr. Raymond ought to double your salary," said another.

"You will be asked to supply one of the great dailies after this," said a third.

Diana scarcely listened to the congratulations which poured in upon her; an unaccountable misery kept assuming larger and larger proportions in her heart.

"But who can the scandal be about? what is the real name of the hypocrite?" said a bright-faced young girl who had only lately joined the Vanguard.

"I cannot tell you," answered Diana. She buried her face in her book—she was sick of this eternal query.

By-and-by she found herself alone in the drawing room. Should she go home on the chance of Matthew returning earlier than usual? No. She was sick of being alone in her lonely flat—she would dine at the club.

Towards the end of dinner a lady sat down not far from her. She raised her eyes and saw her friend, Mrs. Musgrave.

"How do you do?" she said in her cordial voice.

"Oh! I did not see you, Mrs. Gray," said Mrs. Musgrave. She gave her a very icy bow, and turning to her neighbour, began to talk to her.

"What can be the matter?" thought Diana; "have I done anything to offend her? How queer of her to be so stiff to me."

She took the first opportunity to touch her neighbour on the arm, and asked her simply why her manner had changed.

In reply, that lady gave her a very direct and very earnest glance.

"Is it possible you do not know?" she said.

When she spoke, all the other women in the room put down their knives and forks and looked at Diana. She observed, for the first time, a hostile expression in all their eyes.

"But you must know, Mrs. Gray," said Mrs. Musgrave; "it is impossible that you cannot."

"I have not the least idea what you mean," said Diana proudly. "I am conscious of having done nothing wrong; your manner to me implies that I am guilty of some fault."

"One can scarcely speak of what you have done as a mere fault," said Mrs. Musgrave—"it is," she paused—"it is, in my opinion, a very great and very terrible crime. But stay," she added, seeing that Diana had suddenly become ghastly white, "I see I must speak to you alone; come with me into the next room."

Diana went with her, trembling as she did so.

The moment they found themselves alone, Mrs. Musgrave spoke.

"A few minutes ago," she said, "I had made up my mind never to address a word to you again, but on consideration it is but fair to tell you of what we all accuse you."

"You accuse me of something!" said Diana; "come, this is too much!"

"I am afraid it is no use your putting on these innocent airs, Mrs. Gray," said the other lady; "we women will do much for our cause, but there are limits, and you have transgressed them."

"What can you be talking about? Do speak out!"

"I allude to the article which has just appeared in the *Hyde Park Gazette*."

"I am sick of that article—what about it?"

"We have at last found out the name of the man whom you have maligned."

"And who is he?" said Diana; "I am sure I don't know."

"Do you really mean to tell me that you deliberately wrote lies about a person whose name you did not even know?"

"They were not lies, Mrs. Musgrave—they were the truth. Hugh Raymond gave me particulars; he desired me to write; he gave me my subject. I did not ask the name."

"I wonder if this is true," said Mrs. Musgrave, in a thoughtful voice. "Hugh Raymond is capable of a good deal. I never trusted him."

She looked steadily at the agitated woman beside her.

"Speak out, or you will drive me mad," said Diana.

"You did wrong ever to put yourself into the power of a man like Mr. Raymond; you have done a very dreadful thing, and, innocent or guilty, your case is a terrible one. We have reason to believe that there is not a word of truth in the scandal which has got abroad with regard to the reputation of a good and brave man. You have put that scandal into words, Mrs. Gray, and those words have been printed and are now circulated over the length and breadth of England. The name of the man is——"

"Yes," said Diana, "yes. The name, quick," she panted.

"The man's name is Matthew Gray."

Diana fell back as if someone had shot her.

She did not utter a single word, but she suddenly caught the rung of a chair which stood near to support herself—her face turned ghastly.

"Sit down, my dear. I am afraid I have given you a shock," said Mrs. Musgrave; but her words never reached Diana's ears.

"After all, poor girl, she could not have

known it," thought the good woman to herself; "what is it you are saying, Mrs. Gray?"

"Will someone fetch a cab?" said Diana, in a faint voice.

"Yes, come downstairs with me and we will get one immediately. I will put you into it. After all, I believe you are innocent. What a scoundrel Hugh Raymond is; but he shall suffer for this!"

"I want a cab; I must go home at once," said Diana vaguely—she was shaking all over now. Mrs. Musgrave put her arm round her waist and led her downstairs. A passing hansom was hailed, and a moment later the unhappy wife found herself driving back to Carlisle Street.

Would she be in time? She had a dim idea through the tumultuous beating in her heart that Matthew was going away. Would she be in time to see him before he went? She had something to say to him, she was not quite sure what it was—she had something horrible to confess, but she was not certain what the horrible thing consisted of.

The cab drew up at the flat in Carlisle Street. Diana sprang out, paid her fare, and ran upstairs. The servant who let her in told her that Gray had returned half-an-hour ago, had put some things hastily into a bag, had scribbled a note for her and gone away.

"Where is the note? Give me the note—quick," said Mrs. Gray.

In wonder, the girl placed it in her mistress's hands. Diana opened it; it ran as follows: "I am leaving for Paris by the night mail—do not know when I shall return. Matthew Gray." The note had no beginning. It was written in haste, of course, but why not a single word of affection?

"He knows," thought Diana; "I have not told him, but he has found out. I must follow him; if I don't find him I shall go quite mad."

"Can I do anything for you, ma'am? How bad you look!" said the maid.

"Yes, fetch me a cab," said Diana, "I am going out."

"Out again, ma'am? You do look bad."

"Fetch me a cab, and don't talk," said Mrs. Gray, stamping her foot with impatience, "I am going to Victoria. I want to see my husband—it is a quarter to eight, the mail for Paris does not leave until eight o'clock. I may be in time. What are you staring at me for, Alice? Fetch a cab immediately."

The girl rushed away.

Diana pressed both her hands to her throbbing bewildered head. A few minutes later she was driving to Victoria; she had only ten minutes in which to catch the train. As she stepped into the hansom she promised

the driver ten shillings if he got her to Victoria in time for the mail train to Paris.

The man whipped his horse to foam, and Diana lay back in the cab. She was overpowered by a queer sense of bewilderment and uncertainty, hammers seemed to be beating on her brain; she clasped her hands tightly and made vehement efforts to remember what had really occurred. The one and only thought, however, on which her strained and overwrought brain could rest was the thought of Matthew; to be with him, at his feet—on her knees at his feet—that was all she needed now, all she could hope for.

A minute before the train started her hansom drew up at the Chatham and Dover terminus.

"Quick," said Diana, putting her purse into a porter's hands, "get me a ticket for Paris, I must catch this train."

He looked at her in bewilderment.

"Help me into the train, for God's sake!" she said, staring at him.

Her face showed him that there was something wrong the matter; or was this distracted-looking woman insane?—anyhow, it was his duty to help her. He pushed her into a first-class compartment where she found herself alone; and rushing off to the booking-office, got a ticket for her. He gave it to her, with her purse, as the train was steaming out of the station.

"In time, in time," she murmured, "thank God, in time. Shall I get out at Herne Hill, and try to discover in what carriage Matthew is? No, I won't stir; I will wait until I meet him on board the boat. I am glad I am alone; I can collect my thoughts a little now. Oh! Matthew, Matthew! what have I done to you?"

She pressed her hands to her head; there was a dreadful buzzing noise in her ears, as if a swarm of bees had attacked her. The train dashed through different stations and the light hurt her eyes. She closed them involuntarily; she felt giddy; she could not help swaying from side to side.

"Oh, God! what is the matter with me?" she cried presently, in a voice of almost terror, "Where am I? why does my head feel so queer? where am I flying to? I know; I am flying away from my sin. I have sinned past forgiveness; and against whom? Against my own husband, against Matthew! Oh! I am frightened! I wish I was not alone in the carriage. I wish I could hold someone's hand. Mrs. Musgrave said something awful to me a short time ago; she said—'I remember her words—the man whom you have injured is your own husband, Matthew Gray.' Yes, something snapped in



"IT WAS THUS MATTHEW GRAY FOUND HIS WIFE" (p. 216).

my brain then. My own husband, my own Matthew; the one I love, reverence, esteem. No. She could not have said that; I must be imagining it all! Where am I? In my dear little home. Yes, yes; I am at home: I am waiting for Matthew, he promised to come home early to-night; we arranged to go to the play together. No! Of course I am not at home, I am at the Vanguard, and I cannot get that article written. What is the subject to-night? Oh! I know: gossip, gossip, scandal, scandal; it is all odious, and I would not tell Matthew for all the wide world. What would he think of me? could he ever forgive me if he knew? He said—I must not write paragraphs—bless him! what would he think of the articles I do write? Oh! Hugh Raymond, how I hate you! why will you give me this nasty, this loathsome work to do—scandal, scandal? But the debts must be paid, and Matthew must not know; six months more and I shall be free. Where am I? I am not at the club, I am flying through space! Oh! I know now what has happened. Matthew Gray was the man—my husband, Matthew Gray—and it was a lie from beginning to end. But I wrote it—I, his own wife! Where am I? Oh! of course, I know now. Matthew and I are in the same train. How fast we are going; how queer my head feels. Why, surely no train ever bumped like this before—oh! I shall be shaken to pieces! oh, this is fearful! my back, my spine! What is the matter? Oh! that crashing roar! Oh! my God, my God!"

Diana's wild surging thoughts were drowned in oblivion—there was a sense of exquisite pain, of having the very life crushed out of her, and then all was darkness—the club train had swung off the lines, and the end of the carriage in which she had seated herself was completely wrecked.

Matthew Gray leapt out of the compartment in which he was hurrying to Dover, wholly unhurt. A porter came up to him.

"You are unhurt, are you, sir?"

"Yes, yes," he answered; "are many injured?"

"Several passengers at the further end," was the reply, "and one poor lady in a compartment all by herself. I fear she is killed—she is crushed under one of the seats. Perhaps you would help me, sir?"

Matthew hurried with the man down the line. All was awful hurry and confusion. The wounded and dead were being carried hastily into the best shelter that could be found, one or two doctors who happened to be in the train were bending over the sufferers. But no one, with the exception of

this porter, had yet noticed the solitary passenger who lay like one dead in a compartment by herself.

It was thus Matthew Gray found his wife. Between them he and the porter soon released her, and carried the unconscious woman across the lines.

Restoratives were brought, and all that medical aid could do was immediately applied; and, two long hours afterwards, Diana opened her eyes to find those of her husband's looking into hers.

"Am I in another world? and do you know everything, Matthew?" she said in the faintest, the very faintest, of whispers.

"I know that you are alive, my darling," he whispered in her ear.

She closed her eyes again, too faint to move—too faint even to think.

Both her legs were fearfully injured, and the doctor thought she could never walk again. Towards morning the violent pain which she was suffering brought back consciousness. She grew restless and feverish.

"I shall die," she said to herself; "but I must tell him with my own lips before I die."

"Matthew," she said in her feeble voice.

He bent over her.

"You must not speak, Diana," he said.

"Yes," she answered, fever now getting into her voice; "I must. I was following you to tell you."

"I know what you would tell me," he said in a gentle firm voice. "I heard the whole truth yesterday. I suspected the origin of the scandal, and I went straight to see Hugh Raymond. I forced the exact truth from him under pain of an action for libel; he confessed his whole diabolical plot; he dragged you into it in order to punish me more severely. My darling, you never meant to injure me; you did what you did in ignorance. I will ask you, when you are better, why you ever kept a secret from me, Diana."

"Oh! I will tell you now," she said. "I will tell you now."

"No, you must not speak; rest assured that I forgive you completely. I was angry for a little, but my anger has passed. You must live for my sake."

Matthew knelt by her and held her hand. She was too ill and exhausted to keep her eyes open, the lids dropped over the feverish eyes—she slept.

Diana did not die, but the marks of that fearful accident will remain with her to the day of her death, and the awful lesson of that hour will also abide with her. But Matthew Gray has quite forgiven his wife, and that, after all, is the main thing.

IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT.

BY L. T. MEADE.

STORY II.—THE HEART OF VICTORIA.

TOLD BY MATTHEW GRAY.



SHORTLY after the railway accident during which my wife nearly lost her life, I was appointed editor to the *Fleet Street Monthly*. I liked the post, and entered on my new experiences with much zest. Amongst the many contributors to the paper was a man of the name of Basil Housman. He had been an old friend of mine for several years, and I was only too delighted to obtain his somewhat distinguished services, for he was a man of science and a noted traveller. I was never permitted, however, to get a real glimpse into his true character until the following short story occurred.

Housman and I had been friends from our college days, and when he happened to be in London he put up, as a rule, at my house. He was an eminently attractive man, and possessed much personal charm. Wherever he went he made friends. This fact was altogether remarkable, and showed the genuineness of his inner nature, for, as far as externals were concerned, he was, without any exception, the ugliest man I have ever seen. His ugliness was of the essentially pronounced type, and was so self-asserting that it caused comment wherever he appeared. His face was large and roughly hewn, his features irregular, his eyes sunken and small, his skin swarthy; the harsh stubble which took the name of hair on his bulldog head was in keeping with the rest of his characteristics. In short, he was ugly with that aggressiveness which annoys the eye until you know the man so well that you forget the face in the interest which the character gives you.

My friend's name, I have already said, was Basil Housman. Housman is a German name, and some of Basil's characteristics were undoubtedly due to the Fatherland. His ugly face was in no way redeemed by his figure, which was short and ungainly. His arms were too long, his legs too short; he was thickly set too, and when he walked across a room, he did so with a rolling gait which was the reverse of graceful. But his voice was wonderfully beautiful; it was deep and mellow with many modulations. He had also a

gentle and attractive manner, more particularly when he addressed women and children. When he came to stay with us, my wife and I were always delighted to welcome him. He would come without warning or invitation, quite certain that we would be glad to see him, and not wishing to have any fuss made over him.

One afternoon in the beginning of the month of November I had just returned home after a hard day's work, when I saw that the hall was piled up with Housman's belongings. Rugs, Gladstone bags, portmanteaus, a strap full of sticks, and several queer ungainly boxes stopped the way.

"Hullo! here you are!" cried the hearty voice of my friend. He issued out of my study with a pipe in his mouth.

"Welcome back, Housman," I cried. "It is an age since I have seen you."

"I have turned up like the proverbial bad penny," he replied.

"Not at all," I answered; "you know how welcome you are. How long is it since we last met?"

"Two years, five months, and a fortnight," replied Housman promptly. "To be quite accurate I left here at four o'clock on——"

I held up my hand warningly.

"My dear fellow," I replied, "spare me particulars. Suffice it to say I am delighted to see you. By the way, does the wife know you are here?"

"Does she not? I have had tea with her and a long chat—my room was got ready for me nearly two hours ago."

"Then why are all these things in the hall?"

"Because I am only going to stay for a night. I am off to Southsea by the first train in the morning, and I hope to persuade you, Gray, to accompany me."

"I am afraid that is impossible," I replied; "my editorial work——"

"Listen to me—your editorial work must keep. I have a request to make of you. I am about your oldest friend, and I want you to devote your valuable time to me to-morrow but there, I'll say nothing until we have dined. At what hour is dinner likely to be ready?"

"At once, I hope. My wife is dining at her club to-night, so we shall be alone. I'll

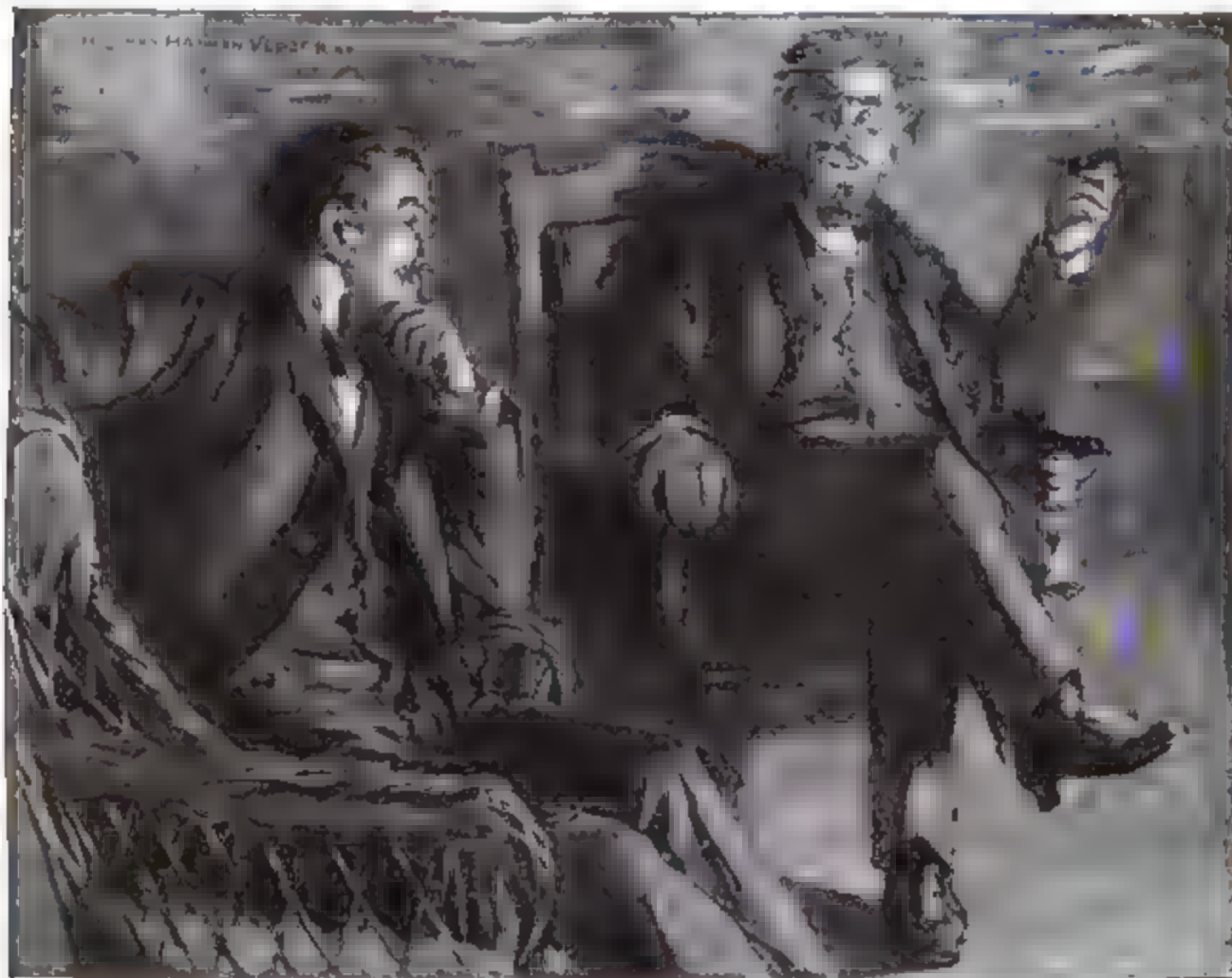
run upstairs to wash my hands, and will meet you in five minutes in the library."

During dinner Housman made himself as agreeable as was his wont. He told story after story in such a manner, with such an inimitable sense of the humour of the situation, that it was impossible to restrain from hearty roars of laughter as I listened to him, and I noticed that the servants had much ado to keep their composure.

lover of Nature and of mankind in general could never concentrate his affections on one woman only. I shared the general opinion on this point, and, in my surprise and delight, started up impulsively to shower congratulations upon him.

He held up one of his huge hands to intercept my words.

"I know exactly what you want to say," he replied. "Let us suppose it said and come to



"NOW FOR YOUR NEWS."

When dinner was over, we went back to the library, and, seating ourselves in two arm-chairs, stretched out our legs to the grateful blaze

"Now for your news," I said, looking full at my friend.

He turned as I spoke, and looked me in the face. His keen short-sighted eyes assumed an expression of pleasant thought. He paused for nearly half a minute before replying; then he said, as if he were discharging a pistol into my face—

"I am going to be married."

Now his many friends prophesied that Housman would never marry, that such a rover could not ever settle down, that such a

facts. I am engaged to be married. The girl's name is Victoria Hynton. I met her on board one of the P. and O. boats returning from India. She was accompanying her father and mother and a young brother to England. Her father is known by his friends as O. P. Hynton; he is an American of the pronounced type, and has, I believe, made a lot of money in oil. They intend to take a house near Southsea, and Victoria has promised to be mine as soon as I can make arrangements for our wedding. The whole thing suits admirably. I am desperately in love with Victoria, and she is desperately in love with me. O. P. Hynton and Mrs. Hynton are charmed to give their daughter to an Englishman,

and, in short, I am the happiest fellow in existence."

"What is the girl like?" I asked after a pause.

Housman lay back in his chair, and began to puff circles of smoke out of his pipe. He watched the vapour as it curled into the air and disappeared; then taking the pipe out of his mouth, he turned and looked at me.

"You do not believe in lovers' rhapsodies, do you?" he asked.

"I like to hear them in the case of genuine fellows like you," I replied. "It is my opinion that a man cannot be too much in love with a girl before marriage. I believe in fervent attachments—they wear best in the end."

He smiled in a somewhat sardonic way.

"You would not have thought me capable of that sort of thing?" he asked.

"Well, no," I replied. "You have always made yourself so agreeable to every girl you came across, that I did not know it was in you to devote yourself wholly and entirely to one."

"Look here," he said, altering his tone on the instant, "I don't believe I can stand chaff on this subject even from you. I am caught at last—bitten hard—bowled over, all the rest. I am thirty-five, she is eighteen, but in our special case difference of age does not really matter."

"I am glad of that," I replied. "You certainly are a good bit her senior. But tell me what she is like. Have you got her photograph anywhere about you?"

"Here," he said, tapping his waistcoat. "I'll show it to you presently—I'd like to describe her first."

"Very well, go ahead," I answered.

"She is tall and fair," began Housman, "the fairest girl I ever met in my life. Nothing dark about her except her eyes—they are large, well open, and of a bright brown colour—here——" He started forward, pulled a velvet case out of his pocket, touched the spring, and handed it to me open to look at.

"You can see for yourself," he said; "I am the luckiest fellow in existence."

I looked at the photograph with interest. It was taken in profile, and represented a girl whose perfect features and whose natural slim young grace could not but be apparent to the most casual observer. The head was nobly formed, and the waving bright hair grew low on the forehead, and was fastened up in a picturesque mass at the back of the head. The features were as regular as those of a Greek goddess.

"Yes," I said, as I returned the photograph to its owner, "that is a picture of a beautiful girl. But I confess I should like to see her in

full face. I cannot judge of the eyes in a profile picture."

"I told you the eyes were dark," said Housman—"the darkest, brightest brown—very dark." He paused; then added abruptly, "Gray, my next words will surprise you. Victoria is stone blind."

I looked my astonishment. I did not speak a word for an instant.

"Blind from her birth," he continued; "never saw the sun, nor the sea, nor Nature in any of her aspects. You will understand therefore that the difference in our ages cannot matter a bit."

Still I did not speak. Housman gazed at me, almost suspending his breath to listen for my words.

"Good God!" I cried at last.

My friend sprang instantly to his feet.

"I knew you would say that, and yet I hoped you would not," he exclaimed. "Why should not I love a blind girl? Don't you think it is about the best possible thing that could happen to me?"

"I can't say I do," I replied. "A blind wife! Good God, Housman, what induced you to do it? Is there no chance of her recovering her sight?" I asked.

"God forbid!" he replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply what I say."

Housman re-seated himself near me.

"Don't you understand?" he began; "can't you see the matter for yourself? I, of all men, ought to be glad to have a wife like Victoria—my personal appearance."

"Fudge!" I replied. "Don't you know by this time that girls admire ugly men? Not that you are ugly at all to those who really know you."

"Yes, I am," he answered. "I never thought at all about the fact until I knew Victoria, but then I took a good stare at myself in the glass and drew certain conclusions. I accept with perfect calmness the inevitable fact that I am the ugliest man in existence—that is nothing to me because Victoria thinks me beautiful. Yes, it is a lucky chance which gives this lovely blind girl to me. The fact is, Gray, although I am ugly, I am monstrous particular. In short, on the subject of woman, I am fastidious. My wife must be purity itself. Her ideas, her motives must be clear as glass—she must be full of lofty aspiration—she, in short, must belong to heaven, while I belong to earth. Now, cannot you understand that Victoria is all that? The gross and common things of life have been shut away from her, but she has come in some wonderful inexplicable way



"SHE STOOD QUITE STILL FOR A MOMENT."

into close contact with the beautiful. You will know for yourself when you see her. Gray, old chap, she has formed the most curious conception about me. Her impression is that I am the ideal of manly beauty. Now you understand how fatal it would be to my happiness if she were to recover her sight."

"As she has reached the age of eighteen and has been blind from her birth, it is scarcely likely she ever will," I replied. "Of course, I congratulate you, Housman. You always were completely out of the common, and a blind wife will add the crown to your peculiar charms. I need not tell you that I am anxious to see Miss Hynton."

"That is good; you will come with me to Southsea to-morrow?"

"With pleasure."

Soon afterwards my friend took his leave. He called for me early the next day when I was to accompany him to Southsea. We arrived there about noon and drove straight to the Hyntons' hotel.

They were prepared for our visit, and welcomed my friend and myself with enthusiasm. O. P. Hynton and his wife

belonged to the better class type of Americans. Their accents, it is true, bore some trace of the country of their birth, but their manners were good, and they were evidently well-educated people. The boy, a lad of fifteen, was a particularly precocious American youth. After chatting with them all for a short time I looked eagerly round for the girl on whom my friend's choice had fallen.

"Run, Charley," said the mother to her son. "Tell Victoria that Mr. Housman and his friend, Mr. Gray, have just arrived. Tell her to come along right in."

The lad started off. The next moment there came a soft rustle of silken drapery, and a very tall and slender girl stood in the doorway. She was dressed in a sort of Liberty costume of very pale green which hung close to her lissom young figure. She stood quite still for a moment, one hand slightly lifted. Her large brown eyes were wide open, and were gazing a little upward as if she meant to follow the light. I noticed how brown they were, quite of a nutty shade, and I also observed even in the first glance something peculiar about the pupils.

As the blind girl stood in the doorway, a ray of sunshine stole across the room and lost itself in her red gold hair. The hair now shone with radiance around her white brow.

Housman went to meet her, took her hand, and led her up to my side.

"This is my friend Gray, Victoria," he said. "I have been telling him all about you."

"I am real glad to see you, Mr. Gray," said Victoria Hynton. Her voice was clear as a bell; there was not a trace of accent about it. It had the same peculiar purity which characterised her face and her wide-open eyes.

"I have read your books," she continued, still keeping her eyes fixed on me as if she could see me. "I admire them very much, more particularly the 'Shadow of the Duke.'"

I felt surprised at hearing her say she had read my books, but I soon found that it was her custom to speak of everything like a person with perfect sight. She seated herself on a chair near me, and nearly took my breath away by going into vivid and rapturous descriptions of some lovely scenery which she had passed through during her journey to England.

"I love scenery beyond anything in the wide world," she said.

"Forgive me," I answered, dropping my voice to a low tone, "how can scenery be of moment to you?"

"Ah," she replied, "I see you know very little about blind people. In one sense, of course, I am blind, but in another, I see. I think I know the peculiar qualities of the atmosphere now so thoroughly that I can tell without anyone describing it—when there is water in the vicinity, also when there are mountains, also when the sky is clouded, also again when the sun shines and the sky is blue. I see landscapes everywhere. I am always making pictures about them. My brother Charley sometimes tells me that my pictures are much more beautiful than the reality. When he tells me so, I no longer wish for your ordinary sight."

I talked to her for a little longer. She was full of brightness and intelligence. In short, she was up-to-date in every particular. After a time I looked at my watch, and found that the hour had arrived when I must catch my return train. I bade Miss Hynton good-bye, and left the room. Mrs. Hynton followed me into the ante-room.

"Well, Mr. Gray," she said in an eager voice, "I hope you are not disappointed in your friend's choice."

"How could I possibly be disappointed?" I replied. "I never met a more beautiful girl than your daughter."

"Yes, but for her want of sight," replied the mother. "Please listen to me for a moment. You do not seem like a stranger, for, of course, I know your books, and Mr. Housman has many times mentioned your name. It is because you seem to us more friend than stranger that I wish now to take you into our confidence. Basil Housman says over and over again that he is quite satisfied to take Victoria in her blindness, but her father and I hope that his quixotic notions in this respect may not be put to the test. In short, we intend to take her to town to-morrow to consult one of the great oculists over her case. This was our principal reason for visiting Europe."

I interrupted in great surprise.

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that you have never yet consulted a good doctor about your daughter's eyes?"

"Well, no, I can't say we have. Come along up here, Obadiah." O. P. Hynton, who had entered the ante-room, went at once to his wife's side.

"I have been telling Mr. Gray of our intention of taking Victoria to an oculist in London," she said.

"That's so," he drawled. "That was our real reason for visiting Europe; we did not wish our girl to see any doctor unless she could see the best, so we put off the day of inquiry until she was grown up. Her mother and I are both surprised at Mr. Housman's wish to marry her, but as the young people fixed it all up for themselves, and of course we know nothing but what is good of Mr. Housman, we agreed to the engagement. But we don't intend the wedding to take place until Victoria has at least had a chance of obtaining the use of her eyes."

"Have you told Mr. Housman of your determination?" I asked.

"Well, no, that is just it, we have not," said the wife. "We thought we'd give him a bit of a surprise. He believes he is going to marry a blind girl. Imagine his delight when he sees Victoria with perfect vision."

I remembered some words Housman had said to me the night before, and after a pause I said emphatically—

"I think I would tell him."

"What is the good of disappointing him if there is nothing in it?" questioned Mrs. Hynton.

"The disappointment is much more likely to be the other way," I answered. "Housman is quite in love with the idea of marrying a blind wife."

"A seeing wife will be much more to the point when all's said and done," interposed O. P. "Well, Mr. Gray, we will think over

your suggestion; and if we think it best, we'll fix it up that he's to know. Anyhow, we take Victoria to London to-morrow."

A moment or two afterwards I took my leave, and returned to town by the next train.

That evening at a late hour, somewhat to my surprise, Housman called to see me. I was in the drawing-room with my wife when he was ushered into the room. He wore his morning clothes, and looked rougher and plainer than I had ever seen him.

"Can I speak to you at once, Gray?" he asked.

"To be sure," I replied, for something in his face immediately aroused my sympathy. "Is my wife in the way?" I continued.

"Not at all," he replied; "that is, if you care to listen to my unhappy story, Mrs. Gray. The fact is this, I am very nearly as miserable as I was the reverse last night. What do you think those people are going to do?"

"Do you mean the Hyntons?" I asked.

"Yes, I mean O. P. Hynton and his wife. They insist upon taking Victoria to an oculist for the express purpose of giving her back her sight."

"They are quite right to do so," I replied. "But how did you find out about it?"

"Mrs. Hynton told me this afternoon. I never was in a greater rage in my life. I said something of what was in my mind, but it had not the least effect upon her. Now, look here, Gray, we must stop this thing."

"How can we interfere?" I asked. "If the girl has the slightest chance of obtaining such a precious possession as sight, how can you have the heart to deprive her of it?"

"You may say what you like about my conduct in this matter," said Housman, springing to his feet as he spoke; "but I stick to my statement that the last thing in all the world I wish Victoria to have is the use of her eyes. Can anything be more perfect than perfect? Can any happiness be greater than the cup of bliss full to the brim? I tell you sight will be her undoing; it will let in evil, it will let in misery. Oh, good God, Gray, can't we stop the thing? If I were her husband, I should have some authority in the matter, but as it is——"

"As it is, you cannot interfere," I said firmly.

He sank down on the nearest chair, and clasped his strong hands tightly together.

"I am sure, Mr. Housman, you are making yourself unhappy very unnecessarily," said Diana in her sweet voice. "If Victoria Hynton is the girl you and my husband have described, nothing can really alter her nature."

"I am none so sure of that," he replied. "The experiment is unnecessary. Again I

repeat it is a pity to damage perfection. I have staked my all on Victoria. She is absolutely unique. There is not a girl like her on the face of God's earth. When she gets her sight, she will be like other girls. And, and—this is the kernel of the trouble, she will see me as I am—ugly and old—old and ugly. Gray, I can't stand it. Is there no power on earth that can stop this thing? I repeat that it is sacrilege to give Victoria any sight but that beautiful inner sight which God Almighty supplies to her."

"I can partly understand your feelings," I said, "but at the same time you will forgive my saying that they are much overstrained. Do you think that you ought from a selfish motive——"

"I? selfish!" interrupted Housman; "perhaps I am."

He stared across the room in a dazed way.

"Not really, old fellow," I said. "Never since the world was made was there a man who thought less of himself and more of others than you do, but, in this special case, have you the right to interfere in order to deprive a girl of recovering the most precious sense ever given to man?"

"Yes," he said, clapping one hand heavily on his knee, "I believe that I am right. Victoria's case is peculiar—her nature is peculiar. She has been shut away from earth, although living in its midst for eighteen years. You must have seen for yourself, Gray, that the grosser things of life do not touch her."

"I never saw anyone less earthly," I exclaimed.

"Then I believe I am right to keep her so. If she goes to an oculist, he will examine her eyes, and by so doing arouse a painful sensation within her which she will call by the name of 'hope.' She will long for that thing which she has never had, thinking it a much more precious gift than it is. She will be induced to undergo a serious operation by which her perfect physical health will be jeopardised. The operation may or may not be successful. If it fails, she will have undergone unnecessary pain and anxiety. If it succeeds, she will be indeed as a god, knowing good and evil, but never, never to her dying day, will she be the same Victoria she was of old. I believe I am right in trying to do my utmost to preserve her in her present state of innocence."

"Well," I said, after a pause, "the only one who can vote against the interview with the doctor is the young lady herself."

He stared at me when I said this, and then answered in an emphatic voice—

"Jove! you are right, Gray; and it is my

belief she will vote against it. Hynton and his wife won't surely persevere against the girl's own wish. You and I will go down to Southsea by the earliest train in the morning, and put the test to her."

"I certainly ought not to interfere in the matter," I said.

"You shall not interfere, but you shall tell her what is about to happen—the very tones of my voice might influence her unduly. I'll sit by, but I'll be silent. She has taken a great fancy to you. You shall tell her the simple truth. Will you come?"

"Yes," I answered, "I'll certainly see you through this."

He started up to wring my hand impulsively.

On the following morning we caught an early train to Portsmouth, and found ourselves at the hotel where the Hyntons were staying, at an early hour. We went up immediately to their rooms, and Housman had a private interview with the American and his wife. I waited for him in the ante-room where Mrs. Hynton had told me of their intention with regard to the oculist on the previous day. Housman was absent

about ten minutes. He returned presently with a red face.

"They mean to take her to town to-day," he said, "but have told her nothing as yet. They are firmly determined that she shall have the advice of Hayward, the famous oculist. But, yielding to my persuasions, they now allow you, Gray, to break the news to her. It is my opinion that if she decides against it, they will not insist on the interview."

At that moment I could not help feeling that I was unfit for the work which I had undertaken. I began to feel queer and nervous. Housman's intense anxiety began to re-act upon me.

"Come along," he said excitedly, "she is waiting for us in the drawing-room. I have told her that you have arrived, and she expressed pleasure at once. She is alone—come—they want to catch the twelve o'clock train, and there is not too much time."

We both entered the drawing-room, where Victoria, wearing the soft silken dress she had on the day before, was seated near one of the windows. The day happened to be a balmy one, and the window was open. She



"HER EYES APPEARED TO LOOK FULL IN THE DIRECTION OF THE SEA."

was gazing straight out, her elbow resting on the window-sill, her hand pressed to her cheek. Her eyes, with their peculiar wide-open expression, appeared to look full in the direction of the sea. She started when she heard our steps, and, rising from her seat, came to meet us.

"How do you do, Mr. Gray?" she said, holding out her hand to me. "I am very glad to see you again. Basil, won't you sit here?"

She motioned to a seat close to herself—he took it immediately. I sat down facing her.

"How delicious the morning is!" she said. "I think I like the somewhat damp quality which characterises your English air. Then what a lovely colour the sea is this morning!"

"What is it like?" I asked, to prove her.

"I know the colour quite well by the noise it is making," she replied; "the sea to-day is purple towards the horizon—deep purple—but there is a wonderful tone of grey-blue nearer the shore. The quality of the air which blows on my face tells me that," she continued, faintly smiling.

I looked full at her. She seemed to feel my gaze, and so sensitive were all her nerves that she even had a faint premonition of trouble in the air. She ceased to look in the direction of the sea and turned her face towards me.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked suddenly, putting one of her hands into Housman's. "Have you come to tell me bad news, Mr. Gray?"

"I have come to bring you news," I answered, "but it is certainly not bad. I have been commissioned by your lover——"

"Yes, Victoria, by me," said Basil. "Now listen."

"It is strange that you, Mr. Gray, should be asked to give me news," she continued. "Why does not Basil speak himself?—the thing must be bad."

"No, it is good," I replied.

"Then why are you troubled, and why is Basil troubled?"

"How do you know that I am troubled, darling?" he asked.

"I feel something indescribably sad all over me," she replied. "I have never in my life known trouble, but as it comes to everyone perhaps it is at last coming to me. Please tell me at once what is the matter."

"It is certainly not trouble," I said. "I'll tell you as you wish, at once—then you can judge for yourself. Your father and mother wish to take you to London to-day."

"Yes," she replied gently, "I knew that last night."

"They are taking you for a specified purpose. They want you to see a good oculist."

"An oculist? What is that?"

"An oculist is the name of a doctor who makes the study of the eye his speciality," I replied slowly.

She pressed one of her hands immediately to her eyes.

"Mine don't ache," she said; "they do not trouble me in any way. Why should I see him?"

"With the hope," I replied, "that he may give you your sight."

"My sight," she answered; she turned white to her lips.

I did not add another word. Housman turned and looked at her. Presently, with a long-drawn sigh, she laid her head on his shoulder.

"Is this true, Basil?" she asked. "Is it possible that I, who have always been blind, can be made to see?"

"They say there is a possibility, Victoria," he replied; his great voice trembled.

"Your father and mother have brought you to Europe for the express purpose of consulting Hayward, the great specialist," I continued. "They have never taken you to an oculist before; they wish to do so now. It is quite possible that something may be done to give you your sight."

"My sight," she repeated; "there is a possibility that I shall really see?" Her eyes grew darker than ever, brighter too. The colour came slowly back to her lips and cheeks.

"You must please yourself in this matter, my darling," said Housman. "As you are now, you are absolutely perfect. If you do not wish to be disturbed, Victoria, I vow that I will not let them take you to an oculist. Understand, my darling, that you must please yourself."

"Would not you like me to see, Basil?" she asked very gently.

"You are perfect as you are," he replied.

"I think," I said slowly, "that the choice in this matter remains with you, Miss Hynton. If you are opposed to seeing the oculist, I am given to understand that your father and mother will not press the point. If, on the other hand——"

She interrupted me; she stood up.

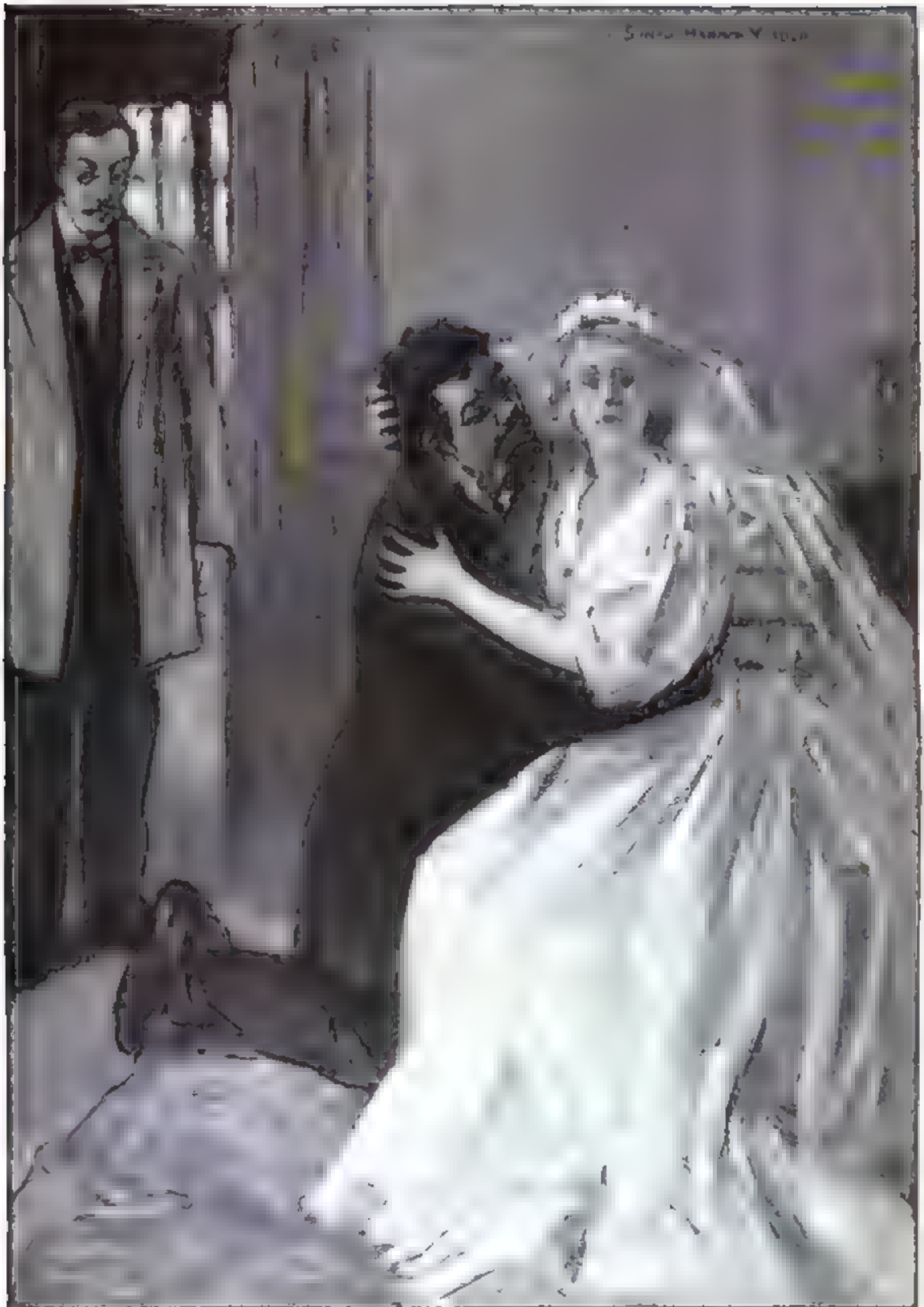
"If I am opposed?" she said in a tone of query. "If all were darkness around you, would you be opposed, Mr. Gray?"

"I cannot say that I would," I replied.

"Would you, Basil?"

He said nothing, but he took her hand. The colour rose richer and brighter in her cheeks. She seemed to palpitate all over with wonderful life.

"If it is a question of choice," she said, "my choice is made; I will go."



"HE RUSHED TO HER SIDE, FLING HIMSELF ON ONE KNEE, AND FOLDED HER IN HIS STRONG ARMS." (P. 490).

"The oculist may pain and disappoint you, Victoria," said her lover.

"I will go," she repeated. "Even the chance of sight—oh, my God, even the chance!" She fell suddenly on her knees, and the tears rained from her sightless eyes. Housman put his arm round her waist, and lifted her to her feet.

"To be able to see you, Basil," she said; "to be able to see your beautiful face. Oh, Basil, I have chosen!"

He did not say another word. He supported her steps across the drawing-room, and took her into the room where her father and mother were waiting for her.

Housman accompanied Victoria to the oculist.

He came to my house that evening to bring me the news. The opinion of the great man was absolute and decided. She was suffering from congenital cataract, which had she lived in London, or consulted any doctor of eminence, would have been removed in her infancy. There was, in Hayward's opinion, little or no doubt that an operation would enable her to see; although now, as he fully explained to her parents and lover, she could never hope to enjoy the sight which she would have had, had her eyes been operated upon in her infancy. She would see, of course; but what are called the ocular muscles would never now be able to do their perfect work.

"She is full of a strange, beautiful sort of happiness," continued Housman. "It is beyond words touching to see her, and to hear her. The Hyntons are taking rooms at the Cosmopolitan, and Hayward will operate on Saturday."

His face was ghastly pale, and the troubled look in his eyes quite altered their expression.

"You ought to be glad," I said, after a pause.

"It shows what a selfish dog I am, that I am not glad," he replied. "I have staked everything on Victoria; if she fails me——"

"She will not do that, old man," I replied; "I, on my part, would stake anything that that girl possesses a heart in a thousand; her heart will show her what stuff you are made of. You wrong her and yourself when you give utterance to such a thought."

"Well," he said abruptly, "I have made up my mind. Hynton and his wife have arranged that the wedding is to be postponed until after the six weeks during which Victoria must stay in a darkened room. On the day after that on which Hayward allows her to use her eyes, we are to be married. That is what they have settled. But my own opinion is that this wedding may never

come off; for I swear before God that if, when she sees me, she is startled, or shows the slightest sense of repulsion, I will never take her to church."

He left me soon afterwards. Nothing that I could say would make him alter his resolve, and I perceived that he was steadily preparing himself for the worst.

I did not see him again for many weeks. During that time I heard nothing about Victoria Hynton, although my wife and I often talked over Housman's story and hers.

One evening, towards the end of January Housman walked into my study.

"How do you do?" he said, holding out his hand. He sank immediately into a chair, and began to mop his forehead. "Pray forgive my not coming near you, during the past six weeks," he said.

"My pardon is more than granted," I replied. "I feel ashamed at not having sought you out."

"Thank God, you did not! I was not fit to be in a decent man's society. I have been a morose beggar—horrible, even to myself. During the last fortnight I have not even been in Victoria's presence."

"How is she?" I asked.

"Well, quite well—too well; in blooming health. The operation was a complete success. No bad consequences followed—no inflammation—nothing. Hayward removed the bandages two days ago, and she is allowed to use her eyes a little, and, her mother says, is rapidly getting them under control. She has not seen me yet. To-morrow is our wedding-day. It is arranged that I am to see her for a few minutes, before we go to church. Gray, old fellow, will you be my friend to the end? Will you help me to see this thing out? Mrs. Hynton has sent you a warm invitation to the wedding. Will you go with me to the Cosmopolitan, at nine o'clock to-morrow morning? I have told no one else of what I mean to do, but I may as well say to you that my mind is absolutely made up."

"I hope you are not going to do anything silly or rash," I said. "Even supposing Miss Hynton shows some slight surprise when first she sees you, is such a fact, perfectly natural remember, to upset the happiness of both your lives?"

"It shall not," he answered. "It certainly shall not destroy the happiness of her life. Gray, I am, perhaps, morbid on this point. As you know already, until I met Victoria I never cared a sou about my personal appearance; but all the same, I could not conceal the truth from myself that I am one of the ugliest men in existence. The fact cannot be

denied that my soul has been clapped into a very ungainly casket. Now, that child worships beauty; her sentiments and feelings on the subject are abnormally sensitive. I need add no more, need I? She will see me face to face to-morrow, and then she herself shall decide."

I made no reply. I saw that my friend was in no humour to be argued with.

About half-past eight the following morning he called for me. He was in his usual everyday clothes.

"Why, you have not put on your bridal finery," I said. "At what hour do you expect to go to church?"

"Between eleven and twelve, if I go at all," he answered. "If Victoria stands the test I can easily go back to my rooms to dress; if not, I am all the better as I am."

His hansom was drawn up in front of my door. I sprang into it; he seated himself by me, and we drove straight to the Cosmopolitan. We were shown into a large drawing-room, where O. P. Hynton and his wife were waiting to receive us. They were both dressed for the wedding. When Housman entered in his rough clothes, the Hyntons glanced at him in some astonishment.

"I'll have time to dress presently," he said. "Where is Victoria?"

"She is waiting for you," said Mrs. Hynton. "Remember, she has not seen you yet. She is most anxious for your arrival. She has not worn the bandages over her eyes for two or three days now, and is quite accustomed to my face and her father's and Charley's, but of course her great anxiety is to see you—she would like to do so first alone. Will you go to her in the other room?"

"I won't see her alone; I want Gray to accompany me," he said. There was a very queer light in his eyes.

"That is not fair," I cried. "What am I to Miss Hynton at this moment? Go by yourself, Housman."

"I vow I won't. Come along, Gray; be quick." He linked his big hand forcibly through my arm, and dragged me towards the door of the ante-room. Charley, who was standing by, ran forward and flung open the door.

"Here is Housman, Victoria," he cried.

We both found ourselves on the threshold of the room. It was slightly darkened, the blinds being more than half-way down; the day was also a dull one. Victoria was seated on the sofa, her slim young figure was slightly bent forward, one of her white hands covered her eyes. I gave her a brief glance and saw that she was in her bridal white. It glistened in long folds all over her slim figure, and lay

in a heavy train at her feet. Her bridal veil was flung over her lovely head, orange blossoms pressed against her brow. She looked beautiful beyond description, but there was a shaken, somewhat forlorn expression about her which went straight to my heart; and I saw that Housman, when he looked at her, absolutely and completely forgot himself.

"Are you there, Basil?" she said, holding out one of her hands. "I am afraid to look; it means so much. Come to me, Basil. Put your arms round me. I won't look at you until I feel the pressure of your arms."

He rushed to her side, flung himself on one knee, and folded her in his strong arms.

She put out one of her hands falteringly as she had never done when she was blind, and began to feel his head and his face.

"It is the same dear head and the same face that I have missed so sorely during the last fortnight," she murmured. "Basil, the world is full of beautiful things, but my idea of perfection, my one ideal of manly beauty is centred on you."

"Look at me before you say another word," he panted.

She raised her eyes then—lovely eyes they were, although somewhat faltering in their gaze. She glanced first at me as I stood in the doorway, and then, turning to Basil, gave him a long and steadfast look. The next moment, with a smile of ineffable bliss and contentment, she laid her head on his shoulder.

I hurried out of the room and closed the door softly behind me.

"Well," said Mrs. Hynton, who looked as if she had been crying, "what has she said to him? Poor darling, she is never tired of repeating to her father and me that, in her opinion, her lover's face is the most beautiful in the world. I tremble to think, Mr. Gray, what she will feel when she really sees him."

"Basil Housman is a right good fellow," said O. P. Hynton, "but, bless my dollars, he is not handsome."

Before I could reply a single word, the door was opened behind us, and Victoria and Housman came out. There were tears on Victoria's cheeks, but her eyes were full of happiness; her lover's arm was firmly placed round her waist.

"I am off to get into my wedding toggery," he cried. His tone was immensely strong and heart-whole now.

"Victoria, my angel, I'll be back in no time," he continued, giving her a glance which she returned with a look which brought the water into my eyes.

They were married before noon that day.

IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT.

BY L. T. MEADE.

STORY III.—THE DIAMOND CRESCENT.

TOLD BY MATTHEW GRAY



THE following is a strange story—I should like to tell it in as few words as possible. On a certain morning early in the month of August my wife and I, accompanied by my private secretary, Rudolph Maxwell, started for Clonfield Abbey, in Devonshire. We were going to spend a month with some old friends, and looked forward to our holiday with feelings of delight which only Londoners can understand.

Maxwell was a particularly good-looking, well set-up, handsome young fellow. He had been my secretary for a couple of months, and had given complete satisfaction. He belonged to the Maxwells of Apsley View, in Cumberland, a good old county family, who had held up their heads and done service for their country during many generations. Maxwell had come to me in answer to an advertisement; the fact that he was the son of my father's old friend, and his own personal appearance, were so satisfactory that I engaged him straightaway, and on the morning of my departure for Devonshire could not help congratulating myself on the acquisition he had proved.

The train by which we travelled into the country happened to be particularly full; we were a little late in arriving on the platform, and had to hurry from carriage to carriage to try and find seats; at last, two vacant places were discovered in a first-class compartment. I put Diana in, arranged our rugs and other possessions in the strap, and seated myself beside her.

"I will find room in the smoking compartment close by," said Maxwell. "Excuse me for a moment," he added, "I see they have put my rug strap in here. I think I'll take it with me into my own carriage." He lifted it down as he spoke, and somewhat awkwardly—for he was, as a rule, full of grace even in his smallest actions—contrived to knock Diana's hand with the rugs; he apologised with much contrition, and the next moment vanished into his own compartment. The train proceeded

on its way; I read my *Times* with the soothed sensation which a man must feel who is leaving his cares farther and farther behind him; Diana dipped into one of the monthly periodicals of the day; suddenly, she looked up and uttered a little cry of astonishment and distress.

I bent towards her

"What is the matter? Are you hurt?" I asked.

"No," she replied, "but I cannot find my ring." She held up her left hand as she spoke; her wedding ring alone adorned her third finger; the very beautiful engagement ring which I had given her, and which she always wore as a guard, had vanished; her face looked pale and startled.

"It has gone," she said, "and yet I certainly had it on when I entered the carriage. What can have become of it?"

"You must have pulled it off with your glove," said an interested fellow-passenger.

"Impossible," she replied; "the ring is a little loose, but not so loose as all that. What shall I do? I would not lose that sparkling for the world."

It was a valuable one, being made of a solid hoop of the best gold, in which three valuable diamonds had been inserted. It had cost me something between seventy and eighty pounds—an extravagance which I thought nothing of in the first rapture of my engagement with Diana. I was as vexed as she was at its disappearance. Our fellow-passengers were full of sympathy, and we all commenced a vigorous search in the railway carriage. We turned up cushions, looked into cracks and crannies, shook out travelling rugs, and, in short, did not leave a stone unturned to discover the missing ring. All in vain; it could not be found, and Diana sat down at last pale and trembling, all the pleasure gone from her face, her eyes dark with unshed tears.

"Never mind," I whispered to her; "you may not have had the ring on your finger, after all, and no ring is worth bringing that look to your face."

"This ring is," she answered with a sort of passion; "I know I had it on." She winked her eyes to keep back the tears, and, turning her head aside, looked out of the window.

We reached our destination in the cool of



"I CANNOT FIND MY RING."

a delightful evening. A wagonette with a spirited pair of horses was waiting for us, and an omnibus had also arrived for our luggage. Our host, Sylvestre, had come himself to meet us; he was a capital fellow, and a great friend of mine. He gave us all a hearty greeting, and then hurriedly took us to our carriage.

"Now, this is delightful," he said; "I have a particularly pleasant house party to meet you. I do hope you'll have a right good time."

"I am sure we shall," I answered. "You don't know what a treat this country air is after London."

"You look as if you wanted change," said Sylvestre, "you in particular, Mrs. Gray. Is anything the matter? I am afraid your journey has quite knocked you up."

Diana made an effort to recover her spirits when our host spoke to her in his kind voice.

"I certainly had no intention of worrying you," she said, "but the fact is, I am really in great trouble. A strange thing happened on our way down here. I lost a very valuable ring."

As she spoke she pulled off her glove, and showed the third finger of her left hand, which was now only ornamented by her wedding ring.

Sylvestre began to make inquiries. In the midst of them he was suddenly interrupted

by my secretary. Maxwell bent forward, and spoke in an eager voice.

"You don't mean to say you have lost your beautiful diamond ring?" he said. There was surprise in his tone.

"Yes, I certainly have."

"But when? I happened to see it on your finger when I was removing the rugs from the carriage."

"There, Matthew," said Diana, turning to me, "did not I say I had it on? Mr. Maxwell also saw it. My last hope has gone." The tears started to her eyes; she made a great effort to recover herself; Maxwell and Sylvestre glanced pityingly at her.

"Yes, the ring was on your finger," repeated Maxwell. "Are you certain that you thoroughly searched the railway carriage?"

"We certainly incommoded all our fellow-passengers," I said. "But now, Diana, my dear, cheer up; it is unfair to Sylvestre to show him such a dismal face."

"I'll be all right in a minute," she answered. "If it had not been my engagement ring I should not mind, but—" she broke off, making a violent effort to recover her spirits.

We took nearly an hour driving to Clonfield Abbey, my friend's beautiful place, and when we did arrive there the colour had returned to Diana's cheeks and much of the brightness to her eyes.

At dinner that evening the subject of the lost ring was mentioned by Sylvestre. It was immediately taken up with interest by almost everyone at the table, and I heard Maxwell talking over the loss with his neighbour, a remarkably pretty girl—a Miss Gifford, a cousin of the Sylvestres.

"There can be only one solution of the mystery," I heard him say.

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Mrs. Gray must have pulled the ring off with her glove. It must have fallen on the ground, and when the door was opened at one of the stations have tumbled on to the rails."

As he spoke silence fell upon the party, and his words were heard by everyone in the room. Miss Gifford, who was seated not far from me, turned her sparkling eyes on my face.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"That may be the possible solution," I replied; "but now let us say nothing more about the ring. It is unfair to worry others with a loss which only concerns my wife and myself."

In our bedroom that evening, Diana reverted to Maxwell's solution of the mystery.

"I really think he may be right," she said.

"It is just possible that the ring may have fallen between the lines, and may still be there. Would it not be well to send telegrams to the different railway stations? Of course, we would offer a reward; then, if one of the navvies should have picked it up, we have a chance of getting it back again."

I acted on my wife's suggestion the next morning.

A reward of five pounds was offered for the lost ring, and steps were taken to ensure an advertisement to this effect being posted up at every station on the line.

Diana and I now watched anxiously for the result, but days passed and there were no tidings of the ring. We were at last reluctantly obliged to make up our minds that it was quite lost, and I at least resolved to do my best to forget a very unpleasant episode.

"When I can, I'll give you another," I said to her.

"You can never give me my engagement ring back," she answered—tears springing to her pretty eyes.

She turned away as she spoke, and, walking to the window of our beautiful bedroom, looked out across the summer country. The window in question was a French one—it stood wide open. There was a balcony outside which was now protected from the hot rays of the afternoon sun by cool green blinds. Diana stepped on to the balcony;

she remained there for about a minute, and then beckoned to me to follow her.

"Look at that couple under the trees to your left," she said.

I followed the direction of her hand and saw my handsome secretary, Rudolph Maxwell, and Lucy Gifford pacing slowly up and down a shady path at some little distance from the house.

"They have been friends from the very first evening," said Diana.

"More than friends, it seems to me," I interrupted.

"I agree with you," she cried. "How charming! What a handsome couple they would make! He is so dark, so distinguished looking, and she so dazzlingly fair. Then their characters, too——"

"My dear, what do we know about either of their characters?" I exclaimed.

"Well, are you not thoroughly pleased with Rudolph Maxwell?" she asked in her impetuous fashion.

"I am; he is a capital fellow."

"And I am sure Miss Gifford is about the most delightful girl I ever came across," said Diana. "Oh! this flirtation quite reconciles me to the loss of my ring," she continued.

"Well, dear, I am glad it pleases you. Of course, Maxwell is without fortune, but he has plenty of brains, and belongs to one of the best families in Cumberland. Lucy Gifford is rich, but not so highly born. Yes, perhaps it will do—that is, if her people approve. But now may I give you a bit of advice, Di?"

"Yes, anything," she answered.

"Don't interfere in the matter. Allow the young people to discover their secret for themselves."

She promised me, and we went downstairs.

Our house party was a particularly cheerful one, and each day passed in a whirl of excitement and innocent gaiety. Day by day Maxwell and Lucy Gifford became better friends. Lucy's beautiful face assumed that sort of expression which a girl will wear when she is stepping, as she thinks, into Paradise. When Maxwell appeared on the scene a softer light came into her eyes, and a more tender radiance visited her lovely face.

One day about a fortnight after our arrival, as I entered the drawing-room before dinner I saw two or three ladies and several men surrounding pretty Lucy Gifford. She had just removed an old-fashioned pearl necklace from her slender throat, and was passing it round to be examined by the party. Amongst those who criticised and looked on was Rudolph Maxwell. He stood nearest to Lucy, and suddenly taking the necklace out

of the hands of one of the ladies, examined it with critical and yet eager eyes. I noticed a covetous gleam in his face; his eyes narrowed themselves; an expression crept round his handsome mouth which gave his face an

in the town hall at Wickton, five miles away. Lucy was all in white of diaphanous texture. Her golden-brown hair, her soft and yet bright grey eyes, the cloudy effect of her pretty dress, only needed the radiance of the



"MORE THAN FRIENDS, IT SEEMS TO ME."

altogether foreign aspect. For a moment it looked sinister—only for a flashing moment, however. The next instant, with a smile full of the sweetest radiance, he gave back the necklace to Miss Gifford, who clasped it once again round her throat.

She was going after dinner with the other girls and young men of our party to a county ball which was taking place

pearls to complete the perfect picture. She stood straight and slim before us all, and talked eagerly about her necklace.

"It is an heirloom in our family," she said. "I don't often wear it, for I believe it is valuable. Mother says that it cost quite eight hundred pounds. But I am very naughty," she continued, "to have it at all. The fact is, I stole it."

"Stole it!" cried Diana.

"Yes; am not I wicked? I stole it from mother's jewel case the night before I came here with—with some other jewels of value. I wrote to mother explaining what I had done. I have had such a letter from her with counsel and warning. I think it would kill her if anything happened to the necklace and to—to the other jewels." She glanced up at Maxwell as she spoke. He smiled back into her eyes, and the next moment he and she had stepped out of the open drawing-room window to continue the very marked flirtation which was now patent to everyone.

Immediately after dinner the young members of the party started in a large covered wagonette for the ball. That evening I played billiards with Sylvestre, and he talked for a moment about Lucy and Maxwell.

"You are quite sure you know all about that young fellow, Gray?" said Sylvestre.

"Of course," I replied. "He brought me unexceptionable references; and, to crown all, is the son of my father's old friend, Maxwell of Apsley View, in Cumberland."

"Oh, if he belongs to those Maxwells, he is as right as rain," said Sylvestre with a laugh. "You'll forgive my questioning you, won't you?—but Lucy is in our charge, and as she is an heiress to a considerable extent, we have to be a little careful."

The conversation then turned into ordinary channels, and soon afterwards we both retired for the night.

I was late for breakfast the following morning, and when I entered the room was somewhat astonished to see the whole party in a state of alarm and agitation. Maxwell, who was standing in the midst of an eager group, was evidently the centre of attraction—he was telling something which was undoubtedly raising a storm in a teacup. His extraordinary news was as follows: he had just met Lucy Gifford, who told him that some person or persons unknown had broken into her sitting-room, where she had placed the pearl necklace the previous night, and had, she feared, absconded with it.

"She is in terrible distress," said Maxwell, whose face looked white and full of agitation. "She burst into tears when she was telling me her story. Ah! here she comes; she will doubtless explain matters better than I can."

"I am in such trouble, Dora," said Lucy, running up to her hostess as she spoke.

"I have just heard about your loss," said her friend. "I never was more astonished in my life. The necklace cannot possibly have been stolen: burglars did not break into this house last night; you must have just forgotten, Lucy, where you really put it."

"I wish I could think so," replied Lucy; "but I remember all the circumstances too well. When we were coming home from the ball last night, Mr. Maxwell and I talked about burglars, and one or two stories he told me rather frightened me. I felt afraid to sleep in the room with the pearls, and put them into the writing-desk in my little sitting-room. When I entered the room this morning, the writing-case was open and the necklace gone. Someone must certainly have stolen it. I shall never be able to face mother again."

Lucy's story caused consternation amongst all our party; and as soon as ever breakfast was over we went up to her room, intending to have a right good search for the missing treasure.

Miss Gifford occupied a pretty little suite of rooms in the west wing. This wing was one of the oldest parts of Clonfield Abbey, and was said to be haunted. The ghost was supposed to walk when the moon was at the full—it made strange noises when it moved about; some nervous people went to the length of saying that it rattled chains; one or two servants had even seen it, and said that the face was of a peculiarly ghastly character. Neither Lucy nor the Sylvestres believed in the ghost, and Lucy gladly occupied the room which was supposed to be the most haunted. On this very account she was always given that special bedroom, with its accompanying sitting-room and dressing room, when she stayed at Clonfield Abbey. The sitting-room was diagonal in shape, with pretty lattice windows; the bedroom beyond was small, and to increase its size a dressing-room had been thrown out, evidently as an after-thought, and made almost entirely of glass. The only light in the bedroom came from the dressing-room, which formed a sort of bay just outside the real window of the room. Sylvestre often talked of altering this queer arrangement; but it was unique, and Lucy enjoyed it so much that he had never yet done so.

We went to the old-fashioned rooms and began our search; no sign of the necklace could be found in any nook or cranny, and Sylvestre went downstairs presently to examine the servants. He returned in a short time to say that, as far as he could tell, they were all innocent. When he uttered these words Lucy burst into tears.

"Mother will never forgive me," she cried. "I feel absolutely full of terror. I have the strangest premonition, too, that there is more to follow."

"You must really not allow your nerves to get affected in that sort of way," said

Sylvestre: "Rest assured that I will do my utmost to get the necklace back for you; and, if no news comes of it during the next few hours, will telegraph to Scotland Yard for the assistance of an able member of the detective staff."

No news being received of the necklace, this step was taken, and a grave-looking, gentlemanly man of the name of Markham arrived on the following day. The servants were told that he was an accountant; he was of middle height, slender in build, with watchful eyes, a keen mouth, and a very grave and unemotional manner. He quite looked his part, which he also filled ably, spending the greater part of his day in Sylvestre's study, looking over the different accounts of the large estate, and to all appearance setting them in complete order. He had several interviews with the steward, with the bailiff, and other members of Sylvestre's staff; the servants suspected nothing, and had little idea that they, as well as all the other people in the house, were really under strict surveillance.

Several days passed without anything special occurring. Miss Gifford recovered her equanimity; she ceased to speak about the necklace, except when in private with my wife or myself.

One day I surprised Diana and Lucy Gifford in earnest conversation.

"I have put it into such an unlikely place, that no burglar would think of finding it," said Lucy. "Mr. Maxwell gave me the idea."

"Are you talking secrets?" I asked. "Must I go away?"

"No; you are quite welcome to hear what I am saying to your wife, Mr. Gray, for I know you won't mention it to anybody else. The fact is this, valuable as the necklace is, I possess a treasure of much greater value."

"What is that?" I asked.

"A diamond pendant, made in the form of a crescent; it is really a magnificent thing, and was given to mother by an aunt who is immensely rich. Mother had it valued, and I believe it is worth quite three thousand pounds. When I stole the necklace, I also took the pendant. I felt quite nervous about it for a short time; but now—oh, it is too funny!—but I must on no account tell you where I have hidden it."

"I should much like to see it," said Diana.

"Some day," replied Lucy. "I may perhaps have the courage to wear it at dinner."

"Why not to-night?" I asked. "They are going to have a large party; I wish you would."

"Very well, I will!" she replied.

Sylvestre called me at that moment, and I

went to join him. I saw Lucy looking anxiously in our direction, and was not surprised when Maxwell soon strode into view.

"Well?" he asked, as he passed my host and myself. "Any news yet from our friend the accountant?"

"Not yet," answered Sylvestre. Then he turned to me.

"I am more anxious than I can tell you, Gray. I should consider it a blot on our honour if Lucy Gifford were to leave here without her necklace; and yet what further steps I am to take I cannot imagine."

"Has Markham really nothing to say?" I asked.

"Well, he looked a bit mysterious this morning, but when I questioned him he would admit nothing the least satisfactory; of course, the only thing we can now do is to wait events, but I don't like the position of affairs."

"Nor do I," I answered.

"I wonder how your wife really lost her ring," continued Sylvestre abruptly.

"It must have been in the way Mr. Maxwell suggested," I answered. "After all, if it did slip from her finger, nothing was more likely than that it should roll out of the carriage when the door was flung suddenly open; Diana was sitting next the door, too."

Sylvestre made no reply. Our conversation drifted into ordinary channels, and we soon afterwards started on a fishing expedition which occupied the whole afternoon.

I returned sooner than the other men, and, walking through the shrubberies, saw Markham, his hat well slouched over his eyes, a pipe in his mouth, pacing slowly up and down under the shade of some elm trees. As I walked forward I suddenly stepped on a rotten branch, which gave a loud crack; the detective turning, saw me and deliberately stood still under the shade of one of the trees. As I approached he took his pipe out of his mouth.

"What a beautiful afternoon!" I said, as I passed him.

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and put it into his pocket.

"The afternoon is all right," he said in an abrupt voice. "Can I have a word with you, Mr. Gray?"

"As many as you like," I replied.

"I want to ask you a question." He turned with me, and we walked slowly together in the direction of the house.

"I hope," I said, seeing that he was in no hurry to deliver himself, "that you have some definite news with regard to Miss Gifford's necklace."

"The thread is in my hand," he said then.

"Indeed, I am delighted to hear it."

"But I can say nothing definite at present."

"You have something to tell me," I said.

"No, sir, I have nothing to tell you; but I have something to ask you."

"Well, ask away," I answered.

"I have," continued the detective, "made since I entered these premises a complete investigation of all the circumstances of this mysterious loss. There is not a servant here, not a groom, not a stable boy, who has not been subjected by me, quite unknown to himself, to a complete cross-examination. I find, as I suspected from the first, that no servant in the house or outside the house is responsible for this loss; the theft has either been committed by a complete outsider, to

whom at present I have no clue whatever, or——" He paused, and looked abruptly at me.

"Well, continue," I said.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sylvestre are themselves above suspicion," he continued. "The search therefore, narrows itself down; one of the guests is the guilty party!"

"Impossible," I said, angrily. "I don't think Mr. Sylvestre would thank you for making an observation of that kind."

"My dear sir, Mr. Sylvestre will thank me when I discover the real thief. Now, there is one man here whose antecedents I should like to know something about."

"And who is he?"

"Your secretary—Mr. Rudolph Maxwell."

I laughed.

"Come, this is too much," I said. "You don't mean to tell me that you suspect that young man?"

"I say nothing, sir. I must search into the history of every guest at present staying in the house, and I choose to begin with Mr. Rudolph Maxwell. Will you kindly answer some questions about him?"

"Of course I will; but let me tell you at once that you are on a wild goose chase."

"That remains to be proved," said Markham. "Now may I question you?"

"Yes."

"How did you first hear of this young man?"

"In answer to an advertisement."

"In what paper did you advertise?"

"The *Times*."

"Will you oblige me by giving the date, or the approximate date?"

"As near as I can remember," I answered, "I advertised for a private secretary on the 5th of May of this year."

Markham took a small memorandum book out of his pocket, and entered the date I had mentioned in it.



"NEXT MOMENT HE HAD FALLEN OVER THE CLIFF" (P. 726).

"Had you many answers to your advertisement?" he asked then.

"Something like fifty."

"Did this young man come to see you personally, or did he apply by letter?"

"He came to see me."

"Did he bring references?"

"Naturally. Not that they were necessary, for the fact that he belongs to the Maxwells of Apsley View, in Cumberland, was in itself a guarantee of his respectability. The man whom you suspect is the son of one of my oldest friends. He is a Cambridge man of striking ability; in short, his career has been without reproach from the first."

The detective took down some further notes in his memorandum book.

"Thank you, sir," he said; "I don't think I have anything further to ask. I will now request you to be altogether silent with regard to this interview."

I promised, and the man left me. I returned to the house, feeling more uncomfortable than I cared to own. A mixture of indignation and irritability possessed me.

Diana took care to make herself very beautiful that evening. She wore her wedding dress, which had been slightly altered to fit the required fashion; round her neck she placed a string of seed pearls, to which was attached a lovely little pendant, also of pearls; in her hair she wore a large pearl pin.

"I wonder you care to wear those," I said. "They will remind poor Lucy of her loss."

"I would not wear them," she replied with spirit, "if Lucy had her own necklace, for these would lose so terribly in comparison; but Lucy is to wear her diamond pendant to-night, and you must allow me to try and look as well as I can by her side."

I said nothing more, and we went downstairs. As soon as ever we entered the largest of the drawing-rooms I observed that Lucy wore her pendant; it flashed on her neck, taking many strange and fantastic hues. She was dressed in a cream-coloured silk dress, made in an old-fashioned manner; it had a long stomacher, and the dress opened below to give a peep of a petticoat of a deeper shade of the same satin, and also to show the little embroidered high-heeled shoes. Lucy's hair was piled high on her head; she looked striking and very beautiful. I observed that Maxwell scarcely took his eyes from her face—she seemed to mesmerise him; wherever she went, whenever she moved, her jewels flashed, and Maxwell's eyes followed her and them. I noticed once again a peculiar expression in his dark, well-formed eyes; there was that slight but somewhat disagreeable

narrowing of the eyelids—a covetous look mingled with the tenderness which sat so well upon his handsome face. I could not help recalling the words Markham had spoken not two hours ago: "I must search into the history of every guest staying in the house, and I choose to begin with Rudolph Maxwell."

I turned impatiently from the memory. Dinner was announced, and we all went into the great dining hall, which was separated from the drawing-rooms by a long passage, and belonged to an older part of the house. After dinner many fresh guests arrived; the ball-room was thrown open, and dancing became the order of the hour. Diana was not strong enough to dance, and I did not intend to spend much time in the ball-room—I went there, however, for a few minutes, and sat down in the enclosure of a deep old window to watch the gay and animated scene. Presently, without noticing me, Maxwell and Lucy Gifford waltzed slowly by in my vicinity. They paused almost opposite my window.

"At last I have seen your diamonds," said Maxwell. "They are even more beautiful than you gave me to understand; no wonder you take care of them, their price is above rubies."

"Yes," she replied, "I know that. I wish with all my heart I had never brought them from home. I have fearful dreams at night about them. I fancy that the burglar has come—the same dreadful burglar who took away my necklace—and that he is murdering me for the sake of the diamonds."

"If you keep the pendant where I tell you, it is quite safe," said Maxwell. "On no account go to bed with it round your neck. Did you place it——?" Here his voice dropped; they waltzed a few steps away, and I could not hear anything further. I was just about to leave the room when they came back again.

"Well, you astonish me," said Lucy; "I always thought you were full of pluck."

"It is you who have pluck," he replied. "I would not sleep in that room of yours for all you could give me."

"What? Do you mean to say you are afraid of ghosts?"

"I must confess to it!" he answered. A flush of colour came into his dark face; he bit his lips. "Early impressions are deep ones," he continued. "I got a fright when I was a child; I also come of a superstitious race. I inherit superstitious terrors. My mother had the gift of second sight."

"I wish I had," said Lucy; "there's nothing in the world I should like more than to see the poor lady who is supposed to haunt my room."

"Do not say so, I beg of you. You don't know what you are talking about!"

"Yes, I do; I simply have no terrors of the unseen. Material things frighten me—a burglar would send me into fits; but my poor ghost—if she came I should coax her to tell me her story."

"God grant you may not be tempted," said Maxwell.

"You look queer, Mr. Maxwell," said the young girl, glancing up into his face; "are you faint?"

"No; but I tremble at your bold words. If I were to see an apparition, I believe I should die on the spot."

"Why so? Surely you are too manly to give way to ungovernable terror at what cannot hurt you?"

"It is in my race," he replied. "Shall I take you to the supper room?"

She put her slender hand on his arm, and they moved out of sight and hearing. The evening passed without any further event of special interest occurring, and we all retired to rest in the early hours of the morning.

The next day at breakfast all was bustle and excitement—a picnic had been arranged to take place on Wallington Plain. This famous place was ten miles from Clonfield Abbey; it boasted of a magnificent view, woods in the background, a river which many fishermen had made famous—in short, it had all the elements necessary to make up a day of complete enjoyment. The arrangement was that friends of the name of Harrington were to meet the Sylvestres and their party, and after a long day on the Plain we were all to go to the Harringtons' for supper and a dance. If the weather was fine enough, we were to dance out of doors; and Lucy looked forward to all the fun with a glow of health on her cheeks, and a sparkle of the sweetest hope in her eyes. She looked so bright, that I could not help bending forward to her and whispering—

"I am glad you are getting over your loss."

"I have not got over it at all," she replied; "but I have just made up my mind to enjoy the present. The fact is," she continued, bending towards me, "I am hopeless about ever getting back the pearls. Are you aware, Mr. Gray, that the detective left here early this morning?"

"What!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Mr. Markham has gone. I conclude that he considers the search quite useless. I heard the sound of wheels as I lay in bed, and jumped up to look from my window. He left Clonfield Abbey between six and seven this morning."

"I don't believe for a moment he has given up the search," I said.

Lucy sighed, and shook her pretty head.

Soon afterwards we rose from the breakfast table, and between ten and eleven o'clock were driving in two large wagonettes and a pony carriage to Wallington Plain. We arrived at our destination in excellent time. The Harringtons with their party appeared on the scene soon afterwards, and the pleasures of one of the happiest days I have ever spent began. No premonition told me of the catastrophe which was so quickly approaching. I felt well; Diana had nearly regained her normal health. The sight of so many young and happy faces was enough to put me in the best of humours—amongst them all, Lucy's charming figure, her gay laugh, the bright and yet tender light in her eyes, were the most conspicuous. Maxwell was unremitting in his attentions all day, and Diana and I quite expected that before they returned to Clonfield Abbey they would be an affianced pair. By tacit consent we each and all left these lovers to themselves—they wandered about together, exploring the beauties of the lovely neighbourhood. At last the evening set in, and the time came when we were to re-enter our carriages and go to the Harringtons' place, a distance of about five miles away. I had just been asked by Sylvestre to accompany a lady in the pony trap when someone exclaimed that Maxwell and Lucy had not yet put in an appearance.

"How tiresome!" I heard Mrs. Sylvestre say; "we shall be late for supper. Mr. Harrington is very particular with regard to punctuality, and eight o'clock is the hour named for the meal."

"I'll go and look for them," I answered. "I saw them about an hour ago going in the direction of the Hillside Woods." I set off running as I spoke, and calling Miss Gifford's name aloud.

Suddenly I heard an answering voice, and Lucy, looking pale and startled, rushed up to me.

"Come at once," she cried; "Mr. Maxwell has hurt himself badly."

"What can have happened?" I asked.

"We were standing on the edge of Denver's Peak, and I was showing him the view," she answered, "he had turned round to speak to me when his face grew pale, he tottered, and the next moment had fallen over the cliff."

"Has he fallen from a height?" I asked.

"Fortunately not," she replied—she was trembling excessively—"he managed by a miracle to catch hold of a ledge of rock; I saw him writhe and then lie still. Oh, I had a moment of agony; then I managed to get at him by climbing down a little side path. I think just for an instant he must have been

unconscious, but when I reached him he had come to himself; he was unable to move, however, and I ran off to find you all."

"Fortunately, I have a brandy flask in my pocket," I said; "I have no doubt that after I have given him a dose he will be better."

She hurried on in front of me without speaking; her face was as pale as it had been bright and rosy; her eyes were full of trouble.

We reached the Peak, and found that Maxwell had already sufficiently recovered to climb to the top; he was half-sitting, half-lying on the grass; his face was ghastly, and when he saw us approaching he put his hand to his head.

"Here's a nice state of things," he said, trying hard to smile; "I fell with some force on my back and hurt my head. Oh, I am much better already." Here he glanced at Lucy with a sort of queer pathos which I could scarcely understand. "I shall be all right after a little rest. There is nothing serious; only the fall has made me dizzy."

"How did you lose your balance?" I asked.

"I had a fit of giddiness. From a child I have had, at intervals, similar attacks; I am afraid I shall be good for nothing for the rest of the evening. I must go back to Clonfield Abbey, and get to bed at once. I shall be quite myself to-morrow, Miss Gifford."

"Yes," she answered. Her lips trembled; she tried to keep the tears back from her eyes.

"Let us go back," she continued; "I, for one, have no heart to dance."

"That will not do," I said. "I am afraid you must go with the others to the Harringtons'. I am very sorry, but it cannot be helped. The pony carriage only holds two, and I must take Maxwell back to the Abbey."

She looked distressed, but a little reflection showed her that there was no alternative. She went up to Maxwell, who held out his hand; they looked into each other's eyes. The expression in his I could not fathom; his face was quite haggard.

After administering brandy, my patient was sufficiently recovered to stagger to his feet. I led him to the pony chaise, and a few minutes later we were driving rapidly back to the Abbey. During the drive Maxwell scarcely spoke.

When we got into the house, I turned to ring the bell to get some refreshment; he came up to me at once, and put his hand on my arm.

"Do not order anything for me," he said. "I could not eat. I want to lie down and shut my eyes. A few hours in the dark will quite restore me."

"Ought you not to see a doctor?" I said, for his looks alarmed me.

"No, this is no case for a doctor," he answered. His lips trembled.

"You look fearfully depressed," I said. "Have you any reason?"

"None—none," he cried in agitation.

"Then you have not put your fortune to the test?"

"Good God, no! I can't talk of this to-night. Let me get off to my room. I am only fit for solitude and my own thoughts."

I saw this was so, and allowed him to depart. I then went into the smoking-room, and, sitting down, began to think over the queer aspect of affairs; the detective's words kept coming back to me again and again; the loss of Diana's ring and the pearl necklace would haunt my brain. Suddenly I started to my feet.

"An opportunity has occurred," I said to myself; "I will go straight away this minute and search Miss Gifford's rooms. Who knows but I may, after all, discover the missing necklace."

No sooner had this thought come to me than I resolved to act upon it.

Having secured a candle and a box of matches, I went at once to the west wing. I think I have already described the peculiar build of Lucy's bedroom; the window, instead of boasting of a through light, looked into the dressing-room, which, having been built out as an afterthought, was mostly composed of glass; in consequence, except on very bright days, Lucy's bedroom was considerably in shadow. Exactly facing the window of the bedroom, a large looking-glass was placed. I do not know why this queer arrangement should flash now before my memory. At this hour the west wing would, of course, be empty; I had no fear of the ghost, and would take the opportunity to have a good search for the necklace. Perhaps Miss Gifford had never placed it in her writing-desk; it is well known that people often completely forget where they have put their greatest treasures. I entered through the sitting-room, which was now quite dark, and went straight into the little bedroom. The moon was shining outside, and the first thing I saw was that the housemaid had forgotten to draw down the window blind, and that in consequence the looking-glass, placed just behind the window in the dressing-room, made queer reflections. A ray of moonlight had struck across the glass, and the first thing I perceived was my own figure dimly outlined in it and, as it were, coming to meet me into the room. Had I not been possessed of really strong nerves I might have been startled; and, as it was, the thought of the ghost flashed across my brain. But I quickly guessed the true nature

of the apparition, and lighting my candle set it down on the window sill. When I did so I discovered that I had heightened the power of reflection in the looking-glass; all its surroundings were lost in indistinctness, but my



"HIS HANDS WERE RAISED, AS IF TO MOTION BACK SOME GHOSTLY VISITANT."

own figure stood boldly out in perfectly clear and startling outline. I went backwards and forwards between the door of the bedroom and the window, and saw myself many times coming to meet myself.

"This would really be ghostly," I murmured under my breath, "if I did not know what it meant. But I have no time now to think of this; I must get on with my search."

I was just about to take the candle to go into the sitting-room, when I heard footsteps soft and yet hurried coming along the passage outside. Was it possible that the maid was coming back to conclude her half-done work? My first instinct was not to show myself. I stepped behind the door. The footsteps came nearer—they were too heavy for a woman's; my heart jumped into my mouth. All of a sudden, I recollected that of course Lucy Gifford must have left her diamonds behind her. Was it possible that the person who

had secured the necklace was now coming to possess himself of the valuable pendant? Who could the thief be? I stood motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. The footsteps went quickly through the sitting-room and entered the bedroom. All of a sudden there was a cry—a cry of the greatest horror I have ever listened to; my blood curdled at the sound. I looked up; I could distinctly see Maxwell's figure reflected in the looking-glass. His hands were raised, as if to motion back some ghostly visitant; his eyes seemed to start from his head; his face was the colour of death itself. The next moment, with a crashing sound, he had fallen on the floor.

This was no moment for reflection. I rushed forward, lifted him up, unconscious as he was, and took him into the sitting-room. There I laid him on a sofa, and began to apply remedies. He looked as if he were stone dead. At last, with a long shivering sigh, he opened his eyes.

The moment he did so, he seemed to be aroused to the most full and terrible consciousness.

"I will confess! I will make amends!" he cried. "Merciful God in Heaven, have pity on my soul! Don't cut me off in the midst of my sin." He sat up; I stood near him, but he did not recognise me. "I have just had a token for death," he gasped. "I saw my own apparition when I entered that accursed room." He covered his face with his hands.

"For God's sake, pull yourself together, Maxwell," I said then. "Tell me at once what you were doing in Miss Gifford's room."

He turned and clutched me with both hands.

"Were you there? Did you see it?" he whispered, his face the colour of chalk. "It wore my face; it came to meet me, to warn me. My doom is sealed. I shall die immediately; that token has never yet failed."

"Doomed or not, speak out now," I said. "Tell me what all this means. What were you doing in Miss Gifford's room?"

"I will tell you the truth, Mr. Gray; I will hide nothing." He dragged himself from the sofa, and dropped on his knees. "I deceived you. I am not what I said I was; my name is——"

At this steps were heard approaching. They were quick and hurried, and evidently belonged to persons who had not the slightest desire for concealment. The flash of approaching lights came through the open door of the octagon room. I heard Markham's quiet and self-contained voice.

"This way, if you please, Mr. Maxwell."

"Maxwell!" I murmured.

"This is the room, sir; the fellow must have come here at night. There is a bedroom beyond, and a dressing-room; but the pearls——" Here Markham's voice dropped; he had entered the room and seen the extraordinary spectacle which there awaited him.

"Good Heavens! what has happened?" he cried; he looked from me to my secretary, then his brow cleared.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Gray," he said; "I have good news for you. Everything has been discovered. That scoundrel on his knees there is no more Maxwell of Apsley View than I am. Allow me to introduce you, sir, to the real Rudolph Maxwell, the son of your old friend."

A gentlemanly, handsome man between twenty and thirty years of age had followed Markham into the room. He came up and held out his hand to me.

"Forgive me for intruding in this fashion," he said, "but there really was no other way. I could not have my name and personality played with. Markham has told me everything. Ah, I guessed at once that we should trace the crime home to Lawson. So you are there, Lawson. Well, your game is up!"

The miserable scoundrel, who was still kneeling, made an effort now to stagger to his feet.

"You can all say what you like to me," he exclaimed. "I care nothing. God has struck me down Himself. My doom is fixed."

"Hold your tongue, man, and let others speak," said Markham. "When I had a word with you yesterday, Mr. Gray, my suspicions were almost certainties. I knew I could not establish my case, however, until I found the real Mr. Maxwell."

"Yes, Lawson, you were a clever scoundrel," continued the real Maxwell, "but Markham here was too much for you. You stole my letters and cards when you also stole my watch and diamond studs."

"As the game is up, you may as well tell me the meaning of all this," I said, turning with a white face to my unfortunate secretary.

"I am quite willing to explain," he answered. "I took you in, Mr. Gray. You were good to me, and so was your wife, and if I could be sorry at having deceived you, I would. The fact is, I belong to a gang of burglars, called the Apollo gang. In our profession we live altogether on our wits, and no subterfuge which attains our object is below our adoption. Two years ago I was valet to that gentleman." He nodded as he spoke in the direction of Maxwell. "While with him it occurred to me that some of his cards and a few letters might

prove useful later on. I stole them, and found, as I had anticipated, that they would serve me. I saw your advertisement, and it occurred to me that as I had been well educated in my youth I might apply for your post and do something to aid my confederates while with you. I showed you one or two of Mr. Maxwell's letters, and sent in his card on the day of my first interview. I found that you were easy to impose upon. I think you know the rest. I abstracted Mrs. Gray's diamond ring during our journey here—I obtained it by a trick common enough to myself and confederates. The ring has been melted down long ago, and I fear the diamonds are sold. I quickly won Miss Gifford's confidence, and having advised her where to place her necklace it was no difficult task to gain possession of it. I worked on her fears for my own purposes, and advised her where to place the diamond pendant in her room. You will find it, if you go to look, in an old chimney ornament which has been pushed out of sight, as if by accident. I meant to secure the diamonds to-night, and for that reason I threw myself over the cliff in order to be able to feign illness so as to get back to the Abbey while the rest of you were away. Had you, Mr. Gray, not returned with me, I might have succeeded in obtaining my booty—but no, I forgot," he added, turning white once more to his very lips, "the awful sight I saw in that room would have upset nerves stronger than mine. My doom is fixed. I go to a higher Tribunal than any earthly to answer for my crimes."

"You have said quite enough now," said Markham, coming forward; "and as I hold a warrant for your arrest, you will allow me to slip these on you, for greater safety."

As he spoke he produced a pair of handcuffs, which he fastened round the prisoner's wrists.

When last I heard of Lawson it was to learn that he had received a sentence of seven years' penal servitude. He had got over the shock which the supposed apparition had caused, and is now working out the punishment he so richly deserved, not in another world, but in this.

As to Lucy Gifford, the shock of this extraordinary *dénouement* affected her health for a long time. Her nerves were shaken. She refused to occupy the haunted room; and having been once told the real story of the supposed Maxwell, begged that his name should never be mentioned to her again.

There are whispers now with regard to this young lady and the real man of the name—but, perhaps, I ought not to divulge anything further.



(Being the First of the Experiences of the Oracle of Maddox Street).

By I. T. MEADE & ROBERT EUSTACE.

My name is Diana Marburg. I am a palmist by profession. Occult phenomena, spiritualism, clairvoyance, and many other strange mysteries of the unseen world, have, from my earliest years, excited my keen interest.

Being blessed with abundant means, I attended in my youth many foreign schools of thought. I was a pupil of Lewis, Darling, Braid and others. I studied Reichenbach and Mesmer, and, finally, started my career as a thought reader and palmist in Maddox Street.

Now I live with a brother, five years my senior. My brother Rupert is an athletic Englishman, and also a barrister, with a rapidly growing practice. He loves and pities me—he casts over me the respectability of his presence, and wonders at what he calls my lapses from sanity. He is patient, however, and when he saw that in spite of all expostulation I meant to go my own way, he ceased to try to persuade me against my inclinations.

Gradually the success of my reading of the lines of the human hand brought me fame—my prophecies turned out correct, my intuition led me to right conclusions, and I was sought after very largely by that fashionable world which always follows anything new. I became a favorite in society, and was accounted both curious and bizarre.

On a certain evening in late July, I attended Lady Fortescue's reception in Curzon Street. I was ushered into a small ante-room which was furnished with the view

of adding to the weird effect of my own appearance and words. I wore an Oriental costume, rich in color and bespangled with sparkling gems. On my head I had twisted a Spanish scarf, my arms were bare to the elbows, and my dress open at the throat. Being tall, dark, and, I believe, graceful, my quaint dress suited me well.

Lady Fortescue saw me for a moment on my arrival, and inquired if I had everything I was likely to want. As she stood by the door she turned.

"I expect, Miss Marburg, that you will have a few strange clients to-night. My guests come from a varied and ever widening circle, and to-night all sorts and conditions of men will be present at my reception."

She left me, and soon afterwards those who wished to inquire of Fate appeared before me one by one.

Towards the close of the evening a tall, dark man was ushered into my presence. The room was shadowy, and I do not think he could see me at once, although I observed him quite distinctly. To the ordinary observer he doubtless appeared as a well set up man of the world, but to me he wore quite a different appearance. I read fear in his eyes, and irresolution, and at the same time cruelty round his lips. He glanced at me as if he meant to defy any message I might have for him, and yet at the same time was obliged to yield to an overpowering curiosity. I asked him his name, which he gave me at once.

"Philip Harman" he said; "have you ever heard of me before?"

"Never," I answered.

"I have come here because you are the fashion, Miss Marburg, and because many of Lady Fortescue's guests are flocking to this room to learn something of their future. Of course you cannot expect me to believe in your strange art, nevertheless, I shall be glad if you will look at my hand and tell me what you see there."

As he spoke he held out his hand. I noticed that it trembled. Before touching it I looked full at him.

"If you have no faith in me, why do you trouble to come here?" I asked.

"Curiosity brings me to you," he answered. "Will you grant my request or not?"

"I will look at your hand first if I may." I took it in mine. It was a long, thin hand, with a certain hardness about it. I turned the palm upward and examined it through a powerful lens. As I did so I felt my heart beat wildly and something of the fear in Philip Harman's eyes was communicated to me. I dropped the hand, shuddering inwardly as I did so.

"Well," he asked in astonishment, "what is the matter, what is my fate? Tell me at once. Why do you hesitate?"

"I would rather not tell you, Mr. Harman. You don't believe in me, go away and forget all about me."

"I cannot do that now. Your look says that you have seen something which you are afraid to speak about. Is that so?"

I nodded my head. I placed my hand on the little round table, which contained a shaded lamp, to steady myself.

"Come," he said rudely, "out with this horror—I am quite prepared."

"I have no good news for you," I answered. "I saw something very terrible in your hand."

"Speak."

"You are a ruined man," I said, taking his hand again in mine, and examining it carefully. "Yes, the marks are unmistakable. You will perpetrate a crime which will be discovered. You are about to commit a murder, and will suffer a shameful death on the scaffold."

He snatched his hand away with a violent

movement and started back. His whole face was quivering with passion.

"How dare you say such infamous things!" he cried. "You go very far in your efforts to amuse, Miss Marburg."

"You asked me to tell you," was my reply.

He gave a harsh laugh, bowed low and went out of the room. I noticed his face as he did so; it was white as death.

I rang my little hand-bell to summon the next guest, and a tall and very beautiful woman between forty and fifty years of age entered. Her dress was ablaze with diamonds, and she wore a diamond star of peculiar brilliancy just above her forehead. Her hair white as snow, and the glistening diamond star in the midst of the white hair, gave to her whole appearance a curious effect.

"My name is Mrs. Kenyon," she said; "you have just interviewed my nephew, Philip Harman. But what is the matter, my dear," she said suddenly, "you look ill."

"I have had a shock," was my vague reply, then I pulled myself together.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I want you to tell me my future."

"Will you show me your hand?"

Mrs. Kenyon held it out, I took it in mine. The moment I glanced at it a feeling of relief passed over me. It was full of good qualities—the Mount of Jupiter well developed, the heart-line clear and unchained, a deep, long life-line, and a fate-line ascending clear upon the Mount of Saturn. I began to speak easily and rapidly, and with that fluency which often made me feel that my words were prompted by an unseen presence.

"What you tell me sounds very pleasant," said Mrs. Kenyon, "and I only hope my character is as good as you paint it. I fear it is not so, however; your words are too flattering, and you think too well of me. But you have not yet touched upon the most important point of all—the future. What is in store for me?"

I looked again very earnestly at the hand. My heart sank a trifle as I did so.

"I am sorry," I said, "I have to tell you bad news—I did not notice this at first but I see it plainly now. You are about to undergo a severe shock, a very great grief."

"Strange," answered Mrs. Kenyon. She paused for a moment, then she said suddenly: "You gave my nephew a bad report, did you not?"

I was silent. It was one of my invariable rules never to speak of one client to another.

"You need not speak," she continued, "I saw it in his face."

"I hope he will take the warning," I could not help murmuring faintly. Mrs. Kenyon overheard the words.

"And now you tell me that I am to undergo severe trouble. Will it come soon?"

"Yes," was my answer. "You will need all your strength to withstand it," and then, as if prompted by some strange impulse, I added, "I cannot tell you what that trouble may be, but I like you. If in the time of your trouble I can help you I will gladly do so."

"Thank you," answered Mrs. Kenyon, "you are kind. I do not profess to believe in you; that you should be able to foretell the future is, of course, impossible, but I also like you. I hope some day we may meet again." She held out her hand; I clasped it. A moment later she had passed outside the thick curtain which shut away the ante-room from the gay throng in the drawing-rooms.

I went home late that night. Rupert was in and waiting for me.

"Why, what is the matter, Diana?" he said the moment I appeared. "You look shockingly ill; this terrible life will kill you."

"I have seen strange things to-night," was my answer. I flung myself on the sofa, and

for just a moment covered my tired eyes with my hand.

"Have some supper," said Rupert gently. He led me to the table, and helped me to wine and food.

"I have had a tiring and exciting evening at Lady Fortescue's," I said. "I shall be better when I have eaten. But where have you been this evening?"

"At the Appollo—there was plenty of gossip circulating there—two society scandals, and Philip Harman's crash. That is a big affair and likely to keep things pretty lively. But, my dear Di, what is the matter?"

I had half risen from my seat; I was gazing at my brother with fear in my eyes, my heart once again beat wildly.

"Did you say Philip Harman?" I asked

"Yes, why? Do you know him?"

"Tell me about him at once, Rupert, I must know. What do you mean by his crash?"

"Oh, he is one of the plungers, you know.



"Have some supper," said Rupert gently

He has run through the Harman property and cannot touch the Kenyon."

"The Kenyon!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. His uncle, Walter Kenyon, was a very rich man, and has left all his estates to his young grandson, a lad of about thirteen. That boy stands between Harman and a quarter of a million. But why do you want to know?"

"Only that I saw Philip Harman to-night," was my answer.

"You did? That is curious. He asked you to prophesy with regard to his fate?"

"He did, Rupert."

"And you told him?"

"What I cannot tell you. You know I never divulge what I see in my clients' hands."

"Of course you cannot tell me, but it is easy to guess that you gave him bad news. They say he wants to marry the heiress and beauty of the season, Lady Maud Greville. If he succeeds in this he will be on his feet once more, but I doubt if she will have anything to say to him. He is an attractive man in some ways and good-looking, but the Countess of Cheddsville keeps a sharp look out on the future of her only daughter."

"Philip Harman must on no account marry an innocent girl," was my next impulsive remark. "Rupert, your news troubles me very much, it confirms—" I could not finish the sentence. I was overcome by what Rupert chose to consider intense nervousness.

"You must have your quinine and go to bed," he said; "come, I insist, I won't listen to another word."

A moment later I had left him, but try hard as I would I could not sleep that night. I felt that I myself was on the brink of a great catastrophe, that I personally, was mixed up in this affair. In all my experience I had never seen a hand like Philip Harman's before. There was no redeeming trait in it. The lines which denoted crime and disaster were too indelibly marked to be soon forgotten. When at last I did drop asleep that hand accompanied me into the world of dreams.

The London season came to an end. I heard nothing more about Philip Harman

and his affairs, and in the excitement and interest of leaving town, was beginning more or less to forget him, when on the 25th of July, nearly a month after Lady Fortescue's party, a servant entered my consulting-room with a card. The man told me that a lady was waiting to see me, she begged for an interview at once on most urgent business. I glanced at the card. It bore the name of Mrs. Kenyon.

The moment I saw it that nervousness which had troubled me on the night when I saw Philip Harman and read his future in the ghastly lines of his hand returned. I could not speak at all for a moment; then I said, turning to the man who stood motionless waiting for my answer:

"Show the lady up immediately."

Mrs. Kenyon entered. She came hurriedly forward. When last I saw her she was a beautiful woman with great dignity of bearing and a kindly, sunshiny face. Now as she came into the room she was so changed that I should scarcely have known her. Her dress bore marks of disorder and hasty arrangement, her eyes were red with weeping.

"Pardon my coming so early, Miss Marburg," she said at once; then, without waiting for me to speak, she dropped into a chair.

"I am overcome," she gasped, "but you promised, if necessary, to help me. Do you remember my showing you my hand at Lady Fortescue's party?"

"I remember you perfectly, Mrs. Kenyon. What can I do for you?"

"You told me then that something terrible was about to happen. I did not believe it. I visited you out of curiosity and had no faith in you, but your predictions have come true, horribly true. I have come to you now for the help which you promised to give me if I needed it, for I believe it lies in your power to tell me something I wish to discover."

"I remember everything," I replied gravely; "what is it you wish me to do?"

"I want you to read a hand for me and to tell me what you see in it."

"Certainly, but will you make an appointment?"

"Can you come with me immediately to

Godalming? My nephew Philip Harman has a place there."

"Philip Harman!" I muttered.

"Yes," she answered, scarcely noticing my words, "my only son and I have been staying with him. I want to take you there; can you come immediately?"

"You have not mentioned the name of the person whose hand you want me to read?"

"I would rather not do so—not yet, I mean."

"But can you not bring him or her here? I am very busy just now."

"That is impossible," replied Mrs. Kenyon. "I am afraid I must ask you to postpone all your other engagements, this thing is most imperative. I cannot bring the person whose hand I want you to read here, nor can there be any delay. You must see him if possible to-day. I implore you to come. I will give you any fee you like to demand."

"It is not a question of money," I replied, "I am interested in you. I will do what you require." I rose as I spoke. "By the way," I added, "I presume that the person whose hand you wish me to see has no objection to my doing so, otherwise my journey may be thrown away."

"There is no question about that," replied Mrs. Kenyon, "I thank you more than I can say for agreeing to come."

A few moments later we were on our way to the railway station. We caught our train, and between twelve and one o'clock arrived at Godalming. A carriage was waiting for us at the station, we drove for nearly two miles and presently found ourselves in a place with large shady grounds. We drew up beside a heavy portico, a man servant came gravely forward to help us to alight and we entered a large hall.

I noticed a curious hush about the place, and I observed that the man who admitted us did not speak, but glanced inquiringly at Mrs. Kenyon, as if for directions.

"Show Miss Marburg into the library," was her order. "I will be back again in a moment or two," she added, glancing at me.

I was ushered into a well-furnished library; there was a writing-table at one end of it on

which papers of different sorts were scattered. I went forward mechanically and took up an envelope. It was addressed to Philip Harman, Esq., The Priory, Godalming. I dropped it as though I could not bear to touch it. Once again that queer nervousness seized me, and I was obliged to sit down weak and trembling. The next moment the room door was opened.

"Will you please come now, Miss Marburg?" said Mrs. Kenyon. "I will not keep you long."

We went upstairs together, and paused before a door on the first landing.

"We must enter softly," said the lady turning to me. There was something in her words and the look on her face which seemed to prepare me, but for what I could not tell. We found ourselves in a large room luxuriously furnished—the window blinds were all down, but the windows themselves were open and the blinds were gently moving to and fro in the soft summer air. In the centre of the room and drawn quite away from the wall was a small iron bedstead. I glanced towards it and a sudden irrepressible cry burst from my lips. On the bed lay a figure covered with a sheet beneath which its outline was indistinctly defined.

"What do you mean by bringing me here?" I said, turning to the elder woman and grasping her by the arm.

"You must not be frightened," she said gently, "come up to the bed. Hush, try to restrain yourself. Think of my most terrible grief; this is the hand I want you to read." As she spoke she drew aside the sheet and I found myself gazing down at the beautiful dead face of a child, a boy of about thirteen years of age.

"Dead! my only son!" said Mrs. Kenyon, "he was drowned this morning. Here is his hand; yesterday it was warm and full of life, now it is cold as marble. Will you take it, will you look at the lines? I want you to tell me if he met his death by accident or by design?"

"You say that you are living in Philip Harman's house?" I said.

"He asked us here on a visit."

"And this boy, this dead boy stood

between him and the Kenyon property?" was my next inquiry.

"How can you tell? How do you know?"

"But answer me, is it true?"

"It is true."

I now went on my knees and took one of the child's small white hands in mine. I began to examine it.

"It is very strange," I said slowly, "this child has died a violent death, and it was caused by design."

"It was?" cried the mother. "Can you swear it?" She clutched me by the arm.

"I see it, but I cannot quite understand it," I answered, "there is a strong indication here that the child was murdered, and yet had I seen this hand in life I should have warned the boy against lightning, but a death by lightning would be accidental. Tell me how did the boy die?"

"By drowning. Early this morning he was bathing in the pool which adjoins a wide stream in the grounds. He did not return. We hastened to seek for him and found his body floating on the surface of the water. He was quite dead."

"Was the pool deep?"

"In one part it was ten feet deep, the rest of the pool was shallow. The doctor has been, and said that the child must have had a severe attack of cramp, but even then the pool is small, and he was a good swimmer for his age."

"Was no one with him?"

"No. His cousin, Philip Harman, often accompanied him, but he bathed alone this morning."

"Where was Mr. Harman this morning?"

"He went to town by an early train, and does not know yet. You say you think it was murder. How do you account for it?"

"The boy may have been drowned by accident, but I see something more in his hand than mere drowning, something that baffles me, yet it is plain—Lightning. Is there no mark on the body?"

"Yes, there is a small blue mark just below the inner ankle of the right foot, but I think that was a bruise he must have got yesterday. The doctor said it must have

been done previously and not in the pool as it would not have turned blue so quickly."

"May I see it?"

Mrs. Kenyon raised the end of the sheet and showed the mark. I looked at it long and earnestly.

"You are sure there was no thunder-storm this morning?" I asked.

"No, it was quite fine."

I rose slowly to my feet.

"I have looked at the boy's hand as you asked me," I said, "I must repeat my words—there are indications that he came by his death not by accident but design."

Mrs. Kenyon's face underwent a queer change as I spoke. She came suddenly forward, seized me by the arms and cried:

"I believe you, I believe you. I believe that my boy has been murdered in some fiendish and inexplicable way. The police have been here already, and of course there will be an inquest, but no one is suspected. Who are we to suspect?"

"Philip Harman," I could not help answering.

"Why? Why do you say that?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you. I make the suggestion."

"But it cannot be the case. The boy went to bathe alone in perfect health. Philip went to town by an earlier train than usual. I saw him off myself, I walked with him as far as the end of the avenue. It was soon afterwards that I missed my little Paul, and began to wonder why he had not returned to the house. I went with a servant to the pool and I saw, oh, I saw that which will haunt me to my dying day. He was my only son, Miss Marburg, my one great treasure. What you have suggested, what I myself, alas, believe, drives me nearly mad. But you must tell me why you suspect Philip Harman."

"Under the circumstances it may not be wrong to tell you," I said slowly. "The night I read your hand I also as you know read his. I saw in his hand that he was about to be a murderer. I told him so in as many words."

"You saw that? You told him! Oh, this is too awful! Philip has wanted money of late and has been in the strangest state. He

has always been somewhat wild and given to speculation, and lately I know lost heavily with different ventures. He proposed to a young girl, a great friend of mine last week, but she would have nothing to do with him. Yes, it all seems possible. My little Paul stood between him and a great property. But how did he do it? There is not a particle of evidence against him. Your word goes for nothing, law and justice would only scout you. But we must act, Miss Marburg, and you must help me to prove the murder of my boy, to discover the murderer. I shall never rest until I have avenged him."

"Yes, I will help you," I answered.

As I descended the stairs accompanied by Mrs. Kenyon a strange thought struck me.

"I have promised to help you, and we must act at once," I said. "Will you leave this matter for the present in my hands, and will you let me send a telegram immediately to my brother? I shall need his assistance. He is a barrister and has chambers in town, but he will come to me at once. He is very clever and practical."

"Is he entirely in your confidence?"

"Absolutely. But pray tell me when do you expect Mr. Harman back?"

"He does not know anything at present, as he was going into the country for the day; he will be back as usual to-night."

"That is so much the better. May I send for my brother?"

"Do anything you please. You will find some telegraph forms in the hall and the groom can take your message at once."

I crossed the hall, found the telegraph forms on a table, sat down and filled one in as follows:

"Come at once—I need your help most urgently. Diana."

I handed the telegram to a servant, who took it away at once.

"And now," I said turning to Mrs.

Kenyon, "will you show me the pool? I shall go there and stay till my brother arrives."

"You will stay there, why?"

"I have my own reasons for wishing to do so. I cannot say more now. Please show me the way."

We went across the garden and into a meadow beyond. At the bottom of this meadow ran a swift-flowing stream. In the middle of the stream was the pool evidently



"Beyond doubt foul play has taken place. The boy met his death in this pool."

made artificially. Beside it on the bank stood a small tent for dressing. The pool itself was a deep basin in the rock about seven yards across, surrounded by drooping willows which hung over it. At the upper end the stream fell into it in a miniature cascade—at the lower end a wire fence crossed it. This was doubtless done in order to prevent the cattle stirring the water.

I walked slowly round the pool, looking down into its silent depths without speaking. When I came back to where Mrs. Kenyon was standing I said slowly:

"I shall remain here until my brother comes. Will you send me down a few sandwiches, and bring him or send him to me directly he arrives?"

"But he cannot be with you for some hours," said Mrs. Kenyon. "I fail to understand your reason."

"I scarcely know that yet myself," was my reply, "but I am certain I am acting wisely. Will you leave me here? I wish to be alone in order to think out a problem."

Mrs. Kenyon slowly turned and went back to the house.

"I must unravel this mystery," I said to myself, "I must sift from the apparent facts of the case the awful truth which lies beneath. That sixth sense which has helped me up to the present shall help me to the end. Beyond doubt foul play has taken place. The boy met his death in this pool, but how? Beyond doubt this is the only spot where a solution can be found. I will stay here and think the matter through. If anything dangerous or fatal was put into the pool the murderer shall not remove his awful weapon without my knowledge."

So I thought and the moments flew. My head ached with the intensity of my thought, and as the afternoon advanced I was no nearer a solution than ever.

It was between four and five o'clock when to my infinite relief I saw Rupert hurrying across the meadow.

"What is the meaning of this, Diana?" he said. "Have you lost your senses? When I got your extraordinary wire I thought you must be ill."

I stood up, clasped his hands and looked into his face.

"Listen," I said. "A child has been murdered, and I want to discover the murderer. You must help me."

"Are you mad?" was his remark.

"No, I am sane," I answered; "little Paul Kenyon has been murdered. Do you remember telling me that he stood between Philip Harman and the Kenyon property? He was drowned this morning in this pool, the supposition being that the death occurred through accident. Now listen, Rupert, we have got to discover how the boy really met his death. The child was in perfect health when he entered the pool, his dead body was found floating on the water half-an-hour afterwards. The doctor said he died from drowning due to cramp. What caused such sudden and awful cramp as would drown a boy of his age within a few paces of the bank?"

"But what do you expect to find here?" said Rupert. He looked inclined to laugh at me when first he arrived, but his face was grave now, and even pale.

"Come here," I said suddenly. "I have already noticed one strange thing; it is this. Look!"

As I spoke I took his hand and approached the wire fence which protected the water from the cattle. Leaning over I said:

"Look down. Whoever designed this pool, for it was, of course, made artificially, took more precaution than is usual to prevent the water being contaminated. Do you see that fine wire netting which goes down to the bottom of the pool? That wire has been put there for some other reason than to keep cattle out. Rupert, do you think by any possibility it has been placed there to keep something in the pool?"

Rupert bent down and examined the wire carefully.

"It is curious," he said. "I see what you mean." A frown had settled on his face. Suddenly he turned to me.

"Your suggestion is too horrible, Diana. What can be in the pool? Do you mean something alive, something——" he stopped speaking, his eyes were fixed on my face with a dawning horror.

"Were there any marks on the boy?" was his next question.

"One small blue mark on the ankle. Ah! look, what is that?"

At the further end and in the deep part of the pool I suddenly saw the surface move and a slight eddying swirl appear on the water. It increased into ever widening circles and vanished.

Rupert's bronzed face was now almost as white as mine.

"We must drag the pool immediately," he said. "Harman cannot prevent us; we have seen enough to warrant what we do; I cannot let this pass. Stay here, Diana, and watch. I will bring Mrs. Kenyon with me and get her consent."

Rupert hurriedly left me and went back to the house across the meadow. It was fully an hour before he returned. The water was once more perfectly still. There was not the faintest movement of any living thing beneath its surface. At the end of the hour I saw Mrs. Kenyon, my brother, a gardener, and another man coming across the meadow. One of the men was dragging a large net, one side of which was loaded with leaden sinkers—the other held an old-fashioned single-barrelled gun.

Rupert was now all activity. Mrs. Kenyon came and stood by my side without speaking. Rupert gave quick orders to the men. Under his directions one of them waded through the shallows just below the pool, and reaching the opposite bank, threw the net across, then the bottom of the net with the sinkers was let down into the pool.

When this was done Rupert possessed himself of the gun and stood at the upper end of the pool beside the little waterfall. He then gave the word to the men to begin to drag. Slowly and gradually they advanced, drawing the net forward, while all our eyes were fixed upon the water. Not a word was spoken; the men had not taken many steps when again was seen the swirl in



"That wire has been put there for some other reason than to keep cattle out."

the water, and a few little eddies were sucked down. A sharp cry broke from Mrs. Kenyon's lips. Rupert kept the gun in readiness.

"What is it?" cried Mrs. Kenyon, but the words had scarcely died on her lips before a dark body lashed the surface of the water and disappeared. What it was we none of us had the slightest idea; we all watched spell-bound.

Still the net moved slowly on, and now the agitation of the water became great. The creature, whatever it was, lashed and lunged to and fro, now breaking back against the net, and now attempting to spring up the smooth rock and so escape into the stream.

The next instant
Rupert raised the
gun, and fired.



As we caught a glimpse and yet another glimpse of the long coiling body I wondered if there was a snake in the pool.

"Come on, quicker now," shouted Rupert to the men, and they pressed forward, holding the creature in the net, and, drawing it every moment nearer the rock. The next instant Rupert raised the gun, and leaning over the water, fired down. There was a burst of spray, and as the smoke cleared we saw that the water was stained with red blood.

Seizing the lower end of the net and exercising all their strength the men now drew the net up. In its meshes, struggling in death agony, was an enormous eel. The next moment it was on the grass coiling to and fro. The men quickly dispatched it with

a stick, and then we all bent over it.

It was an extraordinary-looking creature, six feet in length, yet it had none of the ordinary appearance of the eel I had never seen anything like it before. Rupert went down on his knees to examine it carefully. He suddenly looked up. A terrible truth had struck him—his face was white.

"What is it?" gasped poor Mrs. Kenyon.

"You were right, Diana," said Rupert. "Look, Mrs. Kenyon. My sister was absolutely right. Call her power what you will, she was guided by something too wonderful for explanation. This is an electric eel, no native of

these waters—it was put here by someone. This is murder. One stroke from the tail of such an eel would give a child such a dreadful shock that he would be paralysed, and would drown to a certainty."

"Then that explains the mark by lightning on the dead child's hand," I said.

"Yes," answered my brother. "The police must take the matter up."

Before that evening Mr. Harman was arrested. The sensational case which followed was in all the papers. Against my will, I was forced to attend the trial in order to give the necessary evidence. It was all too damning and conclusive. The crime was brought home to the murderer, who suffered the full penalty of the law.



One of the Sensational Experiences of Diana Marburg, the Oracle of Maddox Street.

By L. T. MEADE & ROBERT EUSTACE.

I WAS sitting in my drawing-room late one afternoon in the end of a sunny and hot July, when Miss Kate Trevor was announced.

My brother Rupert and I had just been carrying on a discussion as to where we were to spend the holidays. We had come to no decision, and Kate's appearance on the scene was very welcome.

"How nice to catch you at home, Di!" she exclaimed. "How do you do, Mr. Marburg?" she continued, turning to my brother and shaking him heartily by the hand. "I was afraid you had flown like the rest of the world."

"We have neither of us yet made up our minds where to go," he answered. "The Continent does not appeal to us, and we have neither time nor money to visit places further afield."

"Where are you going, Kate?" I asked. "You look as if you needed a holiday too—you are quite thin and pale. Is anything the matter?"

She colored slightly and glanced at Rupert.

"You want me to go away?" he said.

He rose lazily from his chair and left the room.

The moment he had closed the door behind him, Kate turned to me.

"With your usual penetration, Diana," she said, "you see below the surface. There is something the matter, and I think—I do think that if relief does not come soon, I shall lose my senses."

As she spoke, her dark, lovely eyes filled with tears; the color mounted into her cheeks, leaving them the next instant paler and more wan than ever.

"You look quite ill," I said. "What can be the matter?"

"I can put the case in a nutshell," she replied. "My difficulty and my misery are both common enough. I am on the eve of becoming engaged to one man, while with all my heart I love another."

"You love Captain Cunnyingham," I said. "I know all about that, remember. I have seen him, and I approve. You, as his wife, will be one of the most envied women in the world."

As I spoke, I glanced at her with all the admiration I felt for so beautiful a girl. Kate was a friend of mine, but I knew little or nothing about her people or her belongings; but it was only necessary to look into the depths of her soft black eyes to know that through some ancestor she must hail from the sunny south. No other clime could produce such raven locks and such a clear olive complexion. Her little features were straight and perfect in their own way, her lips coral red, her teeth a row of pearls.

Now the piquant little face was quite wan with suffering, and the coral lips drooped with all the pain of indecision.

"You are engaged to Captain Cunnyingham," I said. "Have you ceased to love him, that you speak of your engagement in such terms?"

"My engagement to Jim is broken off," she replied. "Not that I love him less; on the contrary, I care more for him than I ever did before; but circumstances are against us both, and even Jim himself has said that we must not think of marriage for the present."

"Then what about your all but engagement to another man?" I asked.

"I am coming to that," she answered. "It is a long story, Diana, and I can only give you its mere outline. I met six months ago a man well known in London society, of the name of Sir Edward Granville. He fell in love with me and asked me to marry him. I refused, but he would not take my refusal. He asked me again, and I told him that I was engaged to Jim.

"Three months afterwards poor Jim lost a lot of money on the Turf, and on making inquiries I found that he had done this in Sir Edward Granville's company. He was nearly distracted, and came to me himself and suggested that as far as any tie between us existed, we were to be absolutely free. The poor fellow was quite broken-hearted when he made this proposal. I agreed to it, for there seemed no help for it; but since then I have been sorry that I yielded.

"Immediately after my engagement with Jim was broken off, Sir Edward brought fresh pressure to bear. My mother exercised all her influence to induce me to accept so wealthy a man, and to give her the gratification of knowing that I had made a brilliant match. My father, who has lately been terribly short of money, added his intreaties to my mother's. Still I was firm, although my life for the last six months has been little short of misery.

"A week ago Sir Edward Granville called and asked to see me. I was forced to see him, although I longed to refuse. But to my great relief I found his attitude towards me considerably altered. He said quite frankly that he had been thinking over matters. That he loved me as much as ever, but on his honor as a gentleman he would no longer persecute me. He asked me to trust him.

"I was surprised and grateful, and I said that I would. He then begged for a proof of my trust. He said that he had taken a house on the river at Goring for the season, that he was making up a house party, and that Captain Cunyngham was to be one of the guests. His special request was that my mother and I should spend a week at Goring.

"I promised. I cannot say whether I was doing right or wrong, but I promised. Mother and I go to Goring on the 1st—that

is next Thursday. And, Diana, now for your part in this comedy or tragedy, for Heaven only knows which it will turn out. Sir Edward has sent you a special invitation. It seems that he has met you in the house of a mutual friend. Here is his invitation. You must accept it for my sake."

She tossed a letter into my lap. I opened and read it. It ran as follows:

DEAR MISS MARBURG,—

Unless you have already made definite plans for your holiday, will you do me the honor of joining my house party at Goring on the 1st? Your friend, Miss Trevor, will be there. She is bringing you this note, and I hope will persuade you to come.—Yours truly,

EDWARD GRANVILLE

"It is very kind of Sir Edward," I said, "but I scarcely know him. What can he want me for?"

"Never mind what he wants you for, Di. Just remember that I want you—that you may be of the most enormous use to me. Come you must. You dare not leave me alone in my present predicament."

"I don't like it," I said, rising and beginning to pace up and down the room. "I wonder you arranged to go. You don't consider poor Captain Cunyngham, when you allow yourself to be made love to by another man in his presence."

"Sir Edward has promised not to make love. Don't be nasty and spiteful, Di. Say at once that you will come."

As she spoke, the beautiful girl put her arms round my neck, and looked into my face with such pleading in her eyes that it was impossible to resist her.

"Of course I'll come," I answered. "I like you far too well to leave you in the lurch."

"I knew you would not fail me," she exclaimed. "Now I shall be quite happy, and shall be equal to the occasion, whatever it may be."

A few moments later she left me, having arranged that she and her mother would call for me on Thursday morning and drive me to Waterloo.

When we were alone, I told Rupert where I intended to spend the first few days of my holidays.

"Do as you like of course, Di," was his answer; "but I wish you were not going."

"Why?" I asked.

"I would rather my sister did not stay in Sir Edward Granville's house."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed.

"Only this," he said. "Granville is not the sort of man I care about, though I have heard nothing definite against him. Go now, however, as you have promised, and tell me when you come back whether my intuitions are correct or not."

Rupert's words gave me a vague sense of uneasiness; yet I was glad I had promised not to desert Kate in this crisis in her affairs.

On the following Thursday, Mrs. Trevor, Kate and I went down to Goring. Our host met us at the station and gave us all a most cordial welcome. As we drove to the house I watched Sir Edward with considerable curiosity. I had met him before, but until now I had no reason to feel any special interest in him. He was a clean-shaven, spare-looking man, with restless grey eyes and a hard mouth. It needed but a glance to show me that his was the character to carry through his own wishes regardless of pain to others.

Almost by second nature, as these thoughts coursed through my brain, I glanced at his hands, which were ungloved. I noticed the long and broad thumb of an iron will—the spatulate fingers of precision and determination. The man who has these characteristics sticks at nothing to obtain his ends. I have seen them in the hands of great generals and also in the hands of great criminals. I looked from the baronet to Kate, who was talking in her liveliest style and looking more sprightly and bewitching than I had ever seen her.

As it was late in the day when we arrived,



I opened the letter and read it.

we were shown at once to our respective rooms in order to dress for dinner. I had brought my maid with me, and sat to rest for a few minutes while she unpacked my things. In less than an hour I went down to one of the big drawing-rooms, where from twenty to thirty guests were assembled. Amongst them I saw Kate, who, in a very simple white dress with a bunch of lilies in her belt, looked fragile and lovely.

She had the gracious bearing and regal appearance of a young queen, and as she turned to talk to a man who stood near I did not wonder at Sir Edward's infatuation. For something had brought the final touch of beauty to those delicate features, and there was an expression in her eyes which only love itself could awaken. The softness joined to the fire, the timidity joined to the strength, were enough to captivate any man, and Sir Edward, not far off, saw this look directed to another man. I watched him although he did not know it, and I saw him

clench one of his hands tightly, while his face turned livid.

Jim Cunnyingham was a young guardsman by profession. He was fair and stalwart and squarely built. I knew him well, having met him before on many occasions; but although at first sight he looked as well and handsome as ever, I soon observed a change in him. Some suspicious crow's feet were beginning to show round his merry blue eyes, his face was thin, and when he was not looking at or talking to Kate, he had the expression of one quite bowed down by care.

I sank into a seat, and my host came up and introduced me to one or two people. Presently he brought Captain Cunnyingham to my side.

"Will you take Miss Marburg in to dinner, Cunnyingham?" he said.

The meal was announced, and we went through the library into the spacious dining-room in a distant wing.

We were scarcely seated before Captain Cunnyingham bent towards me.

"I cannot tell you," he said, "how glad I am that you are here. Have you come with any intention of reading our hands?"

"I have come for rest, not on business," was my reply.

"All the same, I shall beg of you to have a look at my hand," he said. "Your curious profession interests me."

"But have you any real belief in my art, or do you treat it as an amusing pastime?" I said.

"I cannot say that I absolutely believe in palmistry," he said, "but I have sufficient faith in it to treat it with respect, and also to have recourse to it. A fortnight back I had my character and future told me by one of your craft in London, and am anxious to have an independent opinion to see if the two correspond."

"To whom did you go?" I asked.

"Madame Sylvia, in Chester-street."

"May I ask whether she gave you a good character or the reverse?"

"I am quite willing to answer you," he replied, with a grim laugh; "her prognostications were the reverse of pleasant. She said, too, that my hands were most extraordinary; she photographed them and had casts

taken, and gave me a long written opinion. I went to see her with Sir Edward. He, apparently, has the greatest faith in her."

Sir Edward must have overheard the last words, for he bent towards me from his place at the head of the table.

"I take the deepest interest in palmistry, Miss Marburg," he said, "and if you will honor me by looking at my hand by-and-by I shall be much obliged."

I replied gladly in the affirmative—I was all too anxious to study Sir Edward's palm.

He resumed his conversation with his right hand neighbor, and I turned to Captain Cunnyingham.

"Have any of Madame Sylvia's predictions come to pass?" I asked.

"Yes, I am sorry to say," he replied; "I had a very bad time lately at Goodwood with Sir Edward, and other things have also gone wrong," he added.

"You mean that you have lost money?"

"Yes, far more than I could afford. I owe at the present moment between twenty-five and thirty thousand pounds, and how I am to pay it, Heaven only knows. I backed Sir Edward's horse for the Cup. He told me it was a certainty. I have lost heavily also at écarté. You don't know, perhaps, that our host is himself a confirmed gambler. But he is one of the lucky ones."

Captain Cunnyingham sighed. After a moment he said again:

"Luck follows his footsteps as certainly as it eludes mine. He has great wealth, and is always adding to his possessions. And the climax of his good luck, Miss Marburg, is —"

"What?" I asked.

"The winning of Kate Trevor."

"You are mistaken," I said, "he has not won her."

"Watch her, and tell me that again," was his answer.

Sir Edward had been obliged to take a married lady into dinner, but he had managed that Kate Trevor should sit on his other side. He was looking at her now as he talked, and she was returning his glance. Bright as stars were her eyes, and her merry laughter reached our ears. Sir Edward was telling her about an ornament of great value which he had in

his possession, and I heard him say that he would show it to the entire party after dinner.

When we returned to the drawing-room Kate made her way to my side.

"Now tell me exactly what Jim has been talking to you about," she said.

"He said that Sir Edward Granville is invariably lucky," was my answer, "and that amongst all the treasures which fate and fortune have tumbled into his lap, the greatest of all will soon be his."

She did not affect to misunderstand me—tears filled her eyes.

"Does Jim really think that?" she said.

"I am afraid he does," I replied.

She was silent, the pretty white hand which lay on her white dress trembled—with a sudden nervous movement she broke off one of the lilies at her belt, and began to pull it to pieces.

"I heard you and Sir Edward talking about a jewel," I interrupted—"a jewel or an ornament?"

"An ornament," she said—"a curious thing of great value which Sir Edward has inherited from a gipsy ancestor. He told me that since his great-grandfather married a true Romany the luck of his house has been proverbial. She brought the ornament into the family, and as long as the head of the house holds it he obtains all he wishes in love, war, or business."

"But if it goes?" I said.

"Then he dies, goes bankrupt, or morally ruined."

"And does he believe this nonsense?" I queried.

"As much as you believe in the lines on the human hand," she answered. "But, come, here is Sir Edward, and he has brought the ornament with him."

Our host now stood in the centre of the great hall and held what looked like a Maltese Cross in his hand. The ornament measured six inches each way, and was a perfect blaze of diamonds and rubies. None of the stones were particularly large, but their number was bewildering.

Sir Edward looked around him, his eyes met mine, and he suddenly to my surprise put the cross into my hand.

"You would like to examine it, Miss Marburg?" he said.

I looked carefully at the glittering and lovely thing.

"What is it worth?" I asked.

"Considerably over thirty thousand pounds," was his reply.

Then he added, dropping his voice, and speaking as if to me alone, although Miss Trevor and Captain Cunnyingham heard every word he uttered.

"The miracle is that I have kept this cross so long, for it has a very special market value. One big stone is generally safe, for a thief cannot well dispose of it; but if this were stolen it could be easily broken up and the diamonds and rubies, none of them specially large in themselves, could be disposed of separately. Now I will return it to my safe in the library—but pray wait for me, Miss Marburg, for I have a special favor to ask of you."

He was absent for about two minutes—when he returned he came to my side.

"Will you give us a short séance?" he asked. "I beg for this favor at the request of my guests."

I paused for a moment, then I said quietly:

"I will do so on a special condition—will you allow me to read your hand first of all?"

He colored, and I saw a look of annoyance in his eyes, but his reply came quickly.

"With pleasure. May I conduct you to the library?"

I seated myself in a chair at the head of the room, and one by one those who wished to consult me entered. Sir Edward was the first. His hand bore out all my ideas with regard to his character. There was obstunacy, which could amount to cruelty; there was a passionate and absorbing selfishness; and, what gave grim significance to those two qualities an overmastering sense of superstition. I mumbled a few words in praise of what small virtues he possessed, and as I saw that he was all too anxious to get the ordeal over, quickly dismissed him.

One by one several of the visitors consulted me, and at last it was Captain Cunnyingham's turn. I bent over his hand with great interest.

There was no question that the good qualities in it largely predominated, but I was disappointed to perceive how a certain weakness of character in his face was repeated in his hand. I gave him as fair an estimate as I could of his better qualities, and he left me with a smile of satisfaction on his face. Poor fellow! I pitied him from the bottom of my heart. Beyond doubt he was in Sir Edward's power, and Sir Edward could be cruel to gain his ends.

On the following morning but one I had an insight into the true motive of this house party. Kate Trevor, Captain Cunnyingham, and I had not been invited to meet together in Sir Edward's house without a very definite reason.

The morning in question happened to be a glorious one, and I awoke earlier than usual. I determined to get up and have a stroll by the river's bank before breakfast. Accordingly I rang for my maid, Parker. It was a few moments before she appeared. When she entered the room, her usually placid face was blazing with excitement.

"Oh, miss!" she cried, "such a dreadful thing has happened in the night."

"What do you mean?" I answered.

"The house has been broken into, miss, and Sir Edward Granville's diamond and ruby cross has been stolen."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Why, he keeps it in a safe, which is supposed to be burglar-proof."

"Yes, miss, but the safe was opened in the night and the cross taken. None of the other jewels or plate were touched. For that matter, Sir Edward hadn't much down here. The cross is gone, however, and they say it takes the family luck away with it—Sir Edward is almost off his head."

"How was the theft discovered?"

"The butler thought he heard footsteps early this morning, miss, and he went to arouse Sir Edward, but when they got to the library it was too late, for Sir Edward's desk was broken open, and also the tin box where he keeps the keys of the safe. The safe has been burgled and the thief has escaped."

"Is it known how he got in?"

"That's the strange thing, miss, for neither doors nor windows, as far as we can tell,

have been touched. The notion is that someone in the house has done it—but who, is the question. Sir Edward has telegraphed for detectives to Scotland Yard. I never saw a gentleman in such a state. Fit to tear his hair, he is; the local police are with him now."

I hastily dressed and went downstairs.

Several of the guests were standing about in different groups in the hall. Our host was nowhere to be seen. The subject of the robbery was the one topic on everyone's lips.

Who could have done it? and how was it done? were the problems which riveted the attention of each of us at this moment. Presently a door to our right opened, and Sir Edward, accompanied by a police inspector, joined us.

"My dear friends," he said, "you must not let my loss make you all miserable. Do go out and enjoy yourselves. Breakfast will be ready presently."

"But what steps do you propose to take, Sir Edward?" said an elderly gentleman now coming forward. His name was General Raglan.

"I have sent for detectives from Scotland Yard," was Sir Edward's answer. "Until they arrive nothing can really be done."

"When do you expect them?"

"Probably between nine and ten o'clock."

"Then," said General Raglan, glancing round at us all, "I think I speak in the names of everyone present. We should like to be in the house when your detectives arrive—in order to give the police all the help in our power towards the elucidation of this mystery."

"I am very much obliged to you, General Raglan," said Sir Edward, a look of relief stealing over his face. "I did not like to ask you, but it will be best for all of us to have the matter properly investigated."

"That is precisely what I have informed Sir Edward," said the police inspector, now speaking for the first time.

Shortly before ten o'clock the London detective arrived, and at General Raglan's suggestion we all assembled in the hall. We stood about there in groups, and I found myself not far from Captain Cunnyingham. His face was pale and he looked strangely

nervous. Once he came close to me and glanced at me as if about to say something, but the next instant he turned aside, evidently unable to disclose what troubled him. His depression was remarked by more than one person present, but strange to say Kate Trevor did not seem to notice it.

Kate was in wonderfully good spirits. There were spots of vivid color on her cheeks caused by the excitement of the hour. She laughed and talked merrily, and was eager in her conjectures with regard to the nature of the burglary. I saw Captain Cunyngham glance at her once or twice in surprise, and I must own that her manner troubled me not a little. But after watching her closely, I came to the conclusion that a great deal of her riotous spirits was put on, and that in reality she felt as strangely nervous as the rest of us.

In about half-an-hour Sir Edward joined us. He walked quickly through the hall, and stood on a raised platform at one end. His face looked hard and white, and I never liked his expression less.

"I am extremely sorry, ladies and gentlemen," he said, in a loud voice, "that this most unfortunate affair has happened while you are my guests. It is very kind of you to assemble here to listen to what I have got to say. Inspector Fawcett from Scotland Yard has been with me for the last half hour, and, with the aid of the local police, we have gone most carefully into the matter.

"The inspector and the police have arrived at the unanimous conclusion that the robbery has been effected by some person in the house, or at least by some person in collusion with someone outside. This is abundantly proved by the fact that no windows or doors have been tampered with, that there are no footmarks on the soft grass outside, that there is not the slightest sign of disturbance in any of these directions.

"By a lucky chance Inspector Fawcett has discovered a clue, and this clue he wishes to put to the test at once. Now, ladies and gentlemen, I am put into a most unpleasant predicament. Inspector Fawcett cannot put his clue to the test without your collaboration. But if you refuse to help me I have not a word to say."

"We will help you," said General Raglan. "I speak, I am sure, in the names of everyone present?"

"Certainly," echoed each voice in the hall.

Sir Edward bowed.

"Thank you," he said; "the matter is of great importance to me, and I should like the clue so miraculously afforded to be brought to its just conclusion."

"What is the clue?" asked General Raglan.

"I will tell you. Yesterday afternoon a painter came here to varnish a cabinet in which I keep the billiard balls. This cabinet was put into a cupboard in order not to be used until it was dry. To my certain knowledge no one entered the cupboard between the time when the painter returned me the key and the time of the burglary. At three o'clock this morning my butler drew my attention to the cupboard door. I found that the lock had been forced, and the thief, who had previously broken open my desk and also the tin box where I keep the key of the safe, had entered, opened the safe, and removed the diamond pendant. Having committed the theft, he returned the key to the tin box, which he locked, but he was unable to lock the desk or the door of the cupboard, having no keys for the purpose.

"Now, pray listen. By a remarkable chance it has just been discovered that the thief on entering the cupboard, must have bent down to open the safe, and in doing this rested his hand upon one of the knobs of the newly-varnished cabinet, and, the varnish not being dry, *an impression of the palm of his hand* has been left upon it."

An audible murmur of sensation ran through the group as Sir Edward made this startling disclosure.

"I have had the knob removed," he continued, "it is now in the possession of Inspector Fawcett. The request I have to make is that each person will in turn go into the library and submit his or her hand to Inspector Fawcett for comparison with the impression on the knob. The same ordeal I shall ask my servants to submit to. I have one thing further to say. Among my guests there is a lady who is specially skilled in the

marks of the hand. Miss Marburg, by Inspector Fawcett's request, I have to ask you if you will kindly give your services in the impending examination?"

"Certainly, Sir Edward," I replied.

"We will all gladly submit our hands for examination," said a gentleman present.

The London detective now motioned me to follow him, and the three police officers and I entered the library, and closed the door.

Inspector Fawcett showed me the newly-varnished wooden knob, holding it carefully in his hand as I gazed at it.

The next moment I could have screamed aloud, for the impression of the hand which I looked at I instantly recognised. I knew the markings of the human hand too well to have the least doubt. I was gazing at the reverse impression of the left hand of Captain Cunnyingham, which I had studied so carefully two nights before.

"Do you recognise this impression, Miss Marburg?" said Inspector Fawcett, looking me full in the face.

"I do," I replied instantly, "but if you proceed with the examination you will quickly discover it for yourself."

"You will not say any more?"

"No," I answered, "nothing more at present."

He bowed to me, and then proceeded quickly with his examination.

One by one the visitors filed into the library, one by one their hands were compared with the impression of the hand on the knob—they then retired again. At last it was Captain Cunnyingham's turn. His face was very white, but he entered the room with a firm and steady step. His eyes met mine—something in the expression of my face must have put him on his guard. He looked full at the detective.

"Before you put my hand to the test," he said, "I wish to tell you that I know absolutely nothing of this matter."

Detective Fawcett gave him a quick glance, then looked at me, and then went through the usual examination.

"Will you, Miss Marburg," he said, "give your careful attention?"

We both bent over the Captain's hand,

looking carefully at the lines. One by one they corresponded with those on the wooden knob.

"There is no question, sir, that the lines on the knob and the lines in your hand correspond exactly," said the detective. "Is not that your opinion, Miss Marburg?"

"I am sorry to say it is," I answered. "It is not within the bounds of possibility that any other hand could have made the impression which we are now looking at. Line for line, mount for mount, everything precisely corresponds."

"It is enough evidence for my purpose," said the detective. "Captain Cunnyingham, it is my painful duty to ask Sir Edward Granville to give you in charge for breaking open this safe and stealing the diamond and ruby pendant."

Captain Cunnyingham reeled against the wall as the man said these words. It was just as if someone had struck him a physical blow. He did not utter a word, nor attempt to defend himself.

The impression on the knob was horrible in its perfect clearness—the palm of the hand was absolutely distinct.

Inspector Fawcett, who seemed intensely interested, now held the knob in the same position in which it was when on the cabinet, in order to see as far as possible how the thief had held it in order to get the necessary impression. As he did so, the light fell full on the cabinet and I started forward. I saw for the first time something else. This was none other than the clear impression of four finger-tips on the varnished surface of the cabinet just beyond the knob. These finger-tips revealed the exact minutiae of the skin ridges.

I felt myself turning pale as I noticed them, for I saw that, by leaving these marks of the finger-tips, poor Captain Cunnyingham had doubly convicted himself of the crime; as surely, in fact, as if he had confessed it fully. I remembered Professor Galton's well-known and exhaustive researches on finger-prints, the fact which he has abundantly proved being that no two persons in the world have the same skin ridges, and also that these ridges never alter in the most remote degree, except in growth, from babyhood to old age.

The evidential value of these skin ridges is so great that where they are brought into requisition no escape is possible. Beyond doubt, the finger tips on the varnish would settle the matter at once without further discussion, and I felt forced to draw the detective's attention to them.

He smiled grimly.

"That is true," he said. "These marks will of course clinch the matter. They are most important evidence."

"Well," I said, "for my own satisfaction will you kindly allow me to take an impression of Captain Cunnyingham's fingertips and compare them with those marked on the cabinet?"

"There is no objection," was the answer.

In a few moments I had melted a square bar of sealing-wax and taken an impression of the finger tips of Jim Cunnyingham's left hand, the hand in question

"Give me one moment while I make a cursory examination," I said, and, taking out my lens, I began to focus first one finger tip and then the other, and finally to examine the impression on the varnish

The next instant I uttered a cry, and seizing Captain Cunnyingham by the hand, began wringing it in an ecstasy of delight, for I could not find words to express myself coherently at the moment. Both the Captain and Inspector Fawcett must have thought that I had suddenly gone mad.

"Cleared, acquitted, free!" I almost

shouted. "The correspondence of the palm is nothing when we have got this. By what means, or by what hand that impression was made, it is absolutely certain that it is not yours—certain beyond all possibility of doubt—and what is far more important, we have a clue to the identity of the real man, to an absolute certainty, for he has left on that cabinet a sign manual that will differentiate him from every other human being at this moment living on our planet."

As I uttered these words I looked up. Sir

Edward Granville had entered the room. He had evidently been startled by hearing my loud and excited tones.

Inspector Fawcett was now closely comparing the finger prints.

"What is all this excitement about, Inspector?" asked Sir Edward.

"A very queer business, I am afraid, sir. There has been some

deep game played somewhere. The impression on this varnish corresponds exactly with this gentleman's hand as far as the palm goes, but the finger tips don't fit."

"The finger tips!" cried the baronet. "What do you mean, Miss Marburg? What are you all talking about? There are no lines on the finger tips."



Captain Cunnyingham reared against the wall as the man said these words.



I began to focus first one finger tip and then the other.

"Oh, aren't there, Sir Edward?" I said, trembling with excitement as a fantastic thought flashed through my brain. "Let me show you." And I held the sealing wax once more in the flame. "Kindly press the top of your middle finger on the wax, Sir Edward, and I will explain it to you."

"Nonsense!" he cried angrily, drawing back. "What does this mean? Are you mad, Miss Marburg?"

"Mad or sane, I should like you to do it. Inspector Fawcett, will you request Sir Edward to give us the impression of one of his finger tips in this wax?"

"You had better do it, Sir Edward. What the young lady says is quite true. It will be on these finger tips that the evidence will

turn. They are the important things, and I shall be obliged to get the impression of all the finger tips of the people at present residing in this house."

"Please give us yours first, Sir Edward," I said, once more warming the wax.

"It is necessary that it should be done, Sir Edward," said the Inspector. "The lack of correspondence between the impression of the palm and the finger tips on the varnish proves that either Captain Cunyngham had someone else's finger tips, or that someone else had Captain Cunyngham's palm. Now to counterfeit a palm is comparatively easy by reproduction in india-rubber from a cast—to counterfeit the skin ridges is next door to impossible. The deduction therefore is that someone wished to have Captain Cunyngham accused of the crime and has counterfeited his palm knowing nothing of the infinitely more important evidential value of finger tips."

"By the way," added the man, turning suddenly to Jim Cunyngham, "have you ever had a cast taken of your hand?"

"About a month ago in London," was the immediate answer.

"Ah! by whom?"

"Madame Sylvia of Bond Street."

The detective turned to Sir Edward.

"You may as well be the first to have your fingers printed, as you are here," he said.

The baronet instantly obeyed, and as he made the impression on the wax, I saw the three police officers exchange significant glances. They knew quite as well as I did, that they were in the presence of the guilty man.

"Now," said the detective, "we will proceed with the others."

He went to the door which led into the hall as he spoke, and asked General Raglan

to come forward. A few words were sufficient to put the General in possession of the new and startling facts which were now before us.

One by one the guests, in a state of great excitement, appeared, and each and all submitted to the new test. Kate Trevor was the last to have the impression of her fingers taken. The detective cleared his throat and looked around him. He asked me to come forward and in silence I looked at the different impressions.

The last of all to be examined was that of Sir Edward Granville, the cores of whose finger tips corresponded exactly ridge by ridge even to the most remote and minute particulars with the impression made on the varnish.

I stood back in silence. The detective and I exchanged one glance.

"Will you explain?" he said to me.

I tried to speak, but no words would come.

"Then I will do it," he said.

But before he could speak, Sir Edward Granville came forward. He pushed the detective aside and stood facing his guests.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it is unnecessary for Inspector Fawcett to explain himself. The news you have to learn can be communicated in a few words. You see before you in the person of your host the guilty man. Why I concocted so desperate a scheme, and why at the last moment, by the most unlooked-for fatality, my guilt has been proved beyond a shadow of doubt, is not for me now to explain, nor will I enter into all my motives for this action. You will, doubtless, none of you, wish any longer to be my guests; carriages will therefore be ready to convey you to the railway station in an hour. I have now but one thing

to do, and that is to congratulate Miss Marburg on her marvellous detective abilities."

As he spoke he bowed to me, and turning, without another word, left the library.

Then Sir Edward's guests found their tongues. What they said, how much they wondered is not for me to say.

But I have the happiness to relate that this story aroused such an interest in the fortunes of Captain Cunyngham that several members of that strange house party put their heads together, and between them managed to extricate the young guardsman from his difficulties. Early in the following spring I had the happiness of seeing Kate Trevor united to the man she loved.



A few words were sufficient to put the General in possession of the new and startling facts



SIR PENN CARVILL'S ENGAGEMENT

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

SIR PENN CARVILL'S engagement was the talk of all his friends. He was a man of about forty, of good family, fairly rich, and boasting of two nice country seats. He also kept racing stables, and added thereby considerably to his income. Sir Penn was so good-looking, so cheery and gay of heart, that he was a great favorite, and more than one eager mother thought of him as an excellent husband for her daughter, and more than one pretty girl looked at him with eyes of favor.

Nevertheless Sir Penn had proved himself impervious to the charms of all fair women, until a certain day when a bright-eyed Tasmanian girl, who went by the name of Esther Haldane, brought him to her feet. The girl in question was only nineteen, was to all appearances poor, and seemed to have no relations in London, except a brother, who was considered by those who knew best to be a somewhat questionable possession. Karl Haldane was a man without apparent profession, and with no certain income, and there was little doubt that he and his sister lived, before the engagement, more or less as adventurers.

After Sir Penn declared his attachment to Miss Haldane, however, he placed his country seat in Sussex at her disposal, putting her under the charge of his aunt, a certain Mrs. Percival, and going there himself at intervals. The wedding was to take place early in July. Sir Penn received the con-

gratulations of his friends, and Miss Haldane was thought one of the luckiest girls of the day.

The time was the 4th of May. I was dining alone, and was somewhat surprised when Sir Penn's card was brought to me with a request scribbled in writing that I would see him without a moment's delay. I hurried at once into his presence. His face was as a rule remarkable for its serenity, and I was startled when I observed the change in it.

"I fear you are not well," I said. "I hope there is nothing wrong."

"I am afraid there is," he replied. "May I tell you the object of my visit?"

I asked him to seat himself, and prepared to listen with attention.

"I have decided to ask you to help me," he said abruptly. "An ordinary detective would be worse than useless. I have been brought into contact lately with the most extraordinary and uncanny phenomenon, and unless matters are put right without delay, I shall find myself in a serious financial difficulty. You may be certain I would not say these things to you without grave reason, and I must ask for the utmost secrecy on your part."

"Of course," I replied.

He bent forward and looked at me keenly.

"Have you ever, in all your experience of occult matters, come across a case of thought reading in which you were satisfied that imposture was absolutely excluded, and

that the thoughts of one person were really conveyed to the brain of another? Do such things exist in this world of reality?"

I paused before replying.

"You ask me a strange question, Sir Penn, and if you want my true opinion I do think such things possible."

"You think so. Who, then, can be safe? Now listen to my own personal experience. You know, of course, that I am the owner of a number of race-horses. Horse-racing is an expensive game, and my expenses are principally met by successful speculation on my horses. Now, of course there are many secrets in a stable, such as which is the best horse for a certain race, or the capacity of any other horse. These things have to be kept from the outside world. The most important of all our secrets are obtained by what we call 'trials.'

"I will briefly explain. We have, say, half a dozen horses, and we wish to know which is the best for a certain distance. The horses are led out and mounted, and the trial gallop takes place. Now the horse that wins the race may not by any means be the best of the half-dozen horses that we wish to prove, for if such were the case any one watching the trial would at once know our secret. So to keep the matter dark the various saddles are weighted with different weights, giving heavier loads for some horses to carry than others. In this manner we can not only calculate which is the best horse, but can keep the information from outsiders. For a slightly weighted bad horse will beat a heavily weighted good one.

"No one but the trainer and myself know

what weights are applied to the saddles, and the whole thing is done just at the last moment before the horses start. After the trial only my trainer and myself know which is the best horse. We then discuss what we will do and which horse I shall support in the betting market. Is that clear to you?"

"Perfectly," I replied.

"You doubtless also comprehend that if these matters were known to an outsider, he could profit immensely by backing my best horse, and could prevent me getting my money on at a good price."

"I understand."

"Then pray listen. For some time I have



"I asked him to seat himself, and prepared to listen with attention."

been certain that secrets with regard to the weights in the saddles have leaked out, to my own great loss and to the great gain of some one else. On looking carefully into the matter, I find that the bookmakers in London, through whom the fiend who is trying to ruin me must execute his commissions, have information with regard to the horses almost immediately after the trial takes place at Lewes.

"Now I will tell you of the last case. A

trial took place of my horses on the 20th of April on the Downs at eleven o'clock in the morning. On that occasion even my trainer did not know the weights that they carried. In order to make things quite safe I kept the knowledge altogether to myself. The people who witnessed the race were my aunt, Mrs. Percival, Miss Esther Haldane, the young lady to whom I have the honor of being engaged, I myself, and my trainer. My bay horse Victor won the trial, though he was not first by any means in the race. We four talked the matter over on the Downs; we then walked home quietly all together. On reaching home at twelve o'clock I wired to my agent in cipher to invest heavily on Victor, whose price was twenty to one.

"That same afternoon I received the astounding information that he was first favorite at three to one, a large commission already having been executed. Now this commission was executed at Tattersall's, in London, at half-past eleven, actually within half an hour after the trial was known, and also half an hour before any of us reached home from the Downs. The thing is astounding, for even if any one did secretly watch the trial it would be impossible, without knowing the weights, to tell which was the best horse. That knowledge was known to us four only, and to no one else in the world. You have, therefore, this fact to face: *A certain piece of information is known to four people on an open down in Sussex at ten minutes past eleven, and yet that information is acted on in London twenty minutes later.* There is no question of my trainer playing me false, as he could not possibly communicate the information in the time I have mentioned, and I have come to the conclusion that some extraordinary thought transference is the only thing to fall back upon."

I was silent for a moment; then I said suddenly:

"Do you happen to remember, Sir Penn, if the sun was shining on that last occasion?"

"Why?" he asked in some surprise.

"Because there would be just the possibility of your trainer heliographing the information."

"That is a clever suggestion," he exclaimed, "but it won't do. It happened to be a cloudy day."

"Then for a moment I see no solution," I replied. "May I ask if you know any one who has ever threatened to read your thoughts?"

"Certainly I do. Karl Haldane, my future wife's brother, who calls himself a clairvoyant. To be plain with you, Miss Marburg, I have no particular fancy for Mr. Karl Haldane; but there is no doubt he is extremely clever, and Esther is devotedly attached to him. He certainly would be the last man who would try to ruin me. We must try to get at the solution in some other way."

"Nevertheless, may I ask you a question or two?" I said. "Was Mr. Haldane at your house when the affair you have just mentioned took place?"

"No, he had been staying with us, but he left early that morning."

"I should like to see him," I said after a pause.

Sir Penn's eyes brightened.

"You are wrong in suspecting for a moment that Haldane has anything to do with the matter," he said. "Nevertheless, if you like to meet him, you may; I am particularly anxious to introduce you to Esther. I have a big party down at Lewes just now. A trial of my horses for the Derby takes place early next week. Will you come to my place and be present at the trial? Can you do so?"

"Of course I will come. I would throw over any engagement for such an important, and I must say, to me, interesting case."

"Will you come to-morrow? I will meet you by the four-o'clock train."

I promised to do so, and after thanking me warmly he took his leave. Truly a queer case had now been put into my hands. Sir Penn was regarded among all his friends as a practical man; nevertheless, in his difficulties he consulted me, the occultist and believer in thought reading. One thing certainly was evident, either what had happened was a genuine case of thought transference, or a very subtle form of fraud. The latter seemed truly to be impossible.

present, and was dispensing tea. I had met her before, and she came forward now and greeted me kindly.

"It is very good of you to come, Miss Marburg," she said, "and I have delighted more than one person present by saying I am sure you will give a *séance* while you are with us. Oh! of course I quite believe in palmistry, and Mr. Haldane, one of the best clairvoyants I have ever known, will arrive this evening. We shall doubtless have a most interesting time. Have you yet met Mr. Haldane?"

"No."

"Then I shall have the pleasure of introducing two kindred spirits. Ah! Esther, my dear, come here."

A slim, remarkably graceful girl rose from her seat at a little distance. She strolled leisurely towards us. I am tall, but Miss Haldane was half a head taller. Mrs. Percival made the necessary introduction. Miss Haldane looked at me slowly. All her movements were slow. She then opened her magnificent eyes a trifle wider than their wont and held out her hand.

"I am glad to see you," she said in a cordial tone.

She did not utter another word, but went back to her seat. I stood silent where she had left me. I no longer wondered at Sir Penn's infatuation. It was not the beauty of the girl that so impressed me; she was beautiful, for all her features were good; but from a strict standpoint there were prettier girls in the room. No, Miss Haldane's beauty lay in the extraordinary and almost wicked magnetism of her eyes. Those eyes knew too much. I did not think they looked good—they saw too deeply beneath the surface. Even I, callous to most things of that sort, felt my heart beat uncomfortably fast after Miss Haldane's extraordinary and penetrating glance.

"You look tired, Miss Marburg," said Mrs. Percival. "Won't you have some tea?"

She handed me a cup which I took mechanically. I was still thinking of Miss Haldane and her eyes. I felt quite sure that no one could see her without thinking of her eyes alone, the rest of her beautifully moulded

face, graceful pose and slim young figure being all forgotten in the effect that the eyes produced.

In the drawing-room just before dinner I was introduced to Miss Haldane's brother. To my astonishment he was in every respect her opposite. He was a fair haired, stoutly built, ugly man. He was not only ugly but his expression was absolutely unpleasant. Nevertheless, he too had his charms. When he spoke you forgot the ugly features, the sunken eyes, the leer round the mouth. His voice was good, nay, beautiful. His intellect was undoubtedly powerful, and he had a sympathising manner which appealed more or less to all those to whom he spoke. He happened to be my neighbour at dinner on that first evening, and before the meal came to an end I had arrived at the conclusion that he was a most remarkable and most interesting man.

On the next day several of the guests took their departure, and Esther Haldane and I found ourselves alone. We went for a walk together on the Downs and afterwards sat in the cosy boudoir where she made tea for me.

"You must allow me to congratulate you," I said suddenly. "You are a very lucky girl."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Need you ask? You have won the affections of Sir Penn Caryll. You are about to marry him. I have known him since I was a child. You are in luck, Miss Haldane. You are going to marry a good man."

She fixed her eyes on me, the pupils dilating until they looked black; then very slowly the lovely eyes filled with tears. She dropped on her knees beside me.

"You are a clairvoyante," she said; "so, for that matter, is Karl. I am afraid of Karl, and very little would make me afraid of you. Will you look at my hand?"

She held it out as she spoke. I examined it attentively. I saw, to my regret, many bad points. The Mount of Mercury was sunken, the heart-line was chained, and Jupiter was remarkable for his absence. All these things proclaimed this girl, according to my creed, to be unscrupulous, even cruel.

sunken, the heart-line was chained, and Jupiter was remarkable for his absence. All these things proclaimed this girl, according to my creed, to be unscrupulous, even cruel. She did not look cruel, and I had no reason, up to the present, to doubt her honor. Nevertheless, I dropped her hand with a sigh. It was quite an unusual one for a girl to possess.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Am I so very bad?"

"I have seen more promising hands," I answered.

"Tell me what you see."

"Do you really wish to know?"

"Yes."

"Forewarned is forearmed," I said after a moment's pause. "Your circumstances are happy, Miss Haldane, and there is no reason why you should not lead a good and honorable life to the end of the chapter. Nevertheless, your hand points to a certain unscrupulousness in your character. For instance, I should not care to submit you to a very great money temptation."

"Oh, you are horrible!" she cried. Her face grew very white. "You frighten me; you talk nonsense, and yet, and yet it is nonsense that Karl believes in."

She began to rub the offending palm.

"I am going to my room," she said.

"Your words have worried me."

Her manner was somewhat that of a spoiled child. I smiled to myself, but an unaccountable weight of suspicion and dread was hanging over me. Why should I believe anything evil of a beautiful girl like Esther Haldane? What object could she have in injuring the man whom she was about to marry? I felt ashamed of my own suspicions; nevertheless they would not quite go away.

On the next day the trial of Sir Penn's horses would take place, and on that evening, just when dinner was coming to an end, Miss Haldane raised her voice and called across to her brother, who was sitting at the other end of the table.

"Karl!" she cried, "Sir Penn has been asking if you will not give us a *séance* this evening. You have been very disagreeable not to do so before. You will oblige, I

think I may say, *all* the company. Will you not consent on this occasion?"

The ladies bowed and smiled, and the men bent forward to watch what Haldane would do. I thought, or was I mistaken, that he gave his sister a sudden glance of understanding. Then he said, with that slow sort of drawl which now and then characterized him:

"I shall have much pleasure in doing what the company wish."

Sir Penn expressed his satisfaction, and there was a chorus of approval from one and all.

When we met in the drawing-room Haldane came to the front.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I have been asked to give to-night a demonstration of thought transference. This I am willing to do on a condition. I want you all to be absolutely satisfied that there is no deception. I will therefore leave the room in company with some one now present, who shall remain with me until I return.

"While I am away, a certain sentence employing intelligible words shall be decided upon by two persons in the room. All the company may know the sentence if they so will, but it is essential that two should do so in order that there may be a witness that my interpretation of the said sentence is correct. The two persons who know the sentence will stand with their backs toward me at one end of the room; I will stand with my back toward them at the other. And if those two people faithfully think of that sentence, and of that sentence alone, I promise to read their thought and to say what it is. Do you all consider that fair?"

"Certainly," said Sir Penn, "and I will bet you ten pounds, Haldane, that you fail."

"Done, Sir Penn," was the answer.

A discussion as to who should be the person to accompany Mr. Haldane outside the room, and to choose the sentence within the room, immediately ensued.

"In view of my wager, ladies and gentlemen," cried Sir Penn, "I think I may claim the right to be one of those to choose the sentence. As to my partner, I will leave the choice to yourselves."

I could see by Sir Penn's manner that he

He seemed to hesitate for a minute; then he looked into her eyes, and said softly:

"As you wish."

Sir Penn then turned to me.

"Miss Marburg," he said, "may I ask you to accompany Mr. Haldane from the room?"

"With pleasure," I replied. I felt interested and excited, and was determined that no trickery should be played if I could prevent it.

Karl Haldane and I repaired to the library, and in exactly ten minutes' time returned to the drawing-room. There was a dead silence. Sir Penn and Miss Haldane stood at the further end of the room. Karl Haldane at once took up his position, with his back towards them. Being,

as it were, in the position of umpire, I determined to watch the experiment with the utmost vigilance, and accordingly I crossed the room to where Sir Penn and Miss Haldane were standing. I stood near them and took care to watch them both. They were absolutely still. Miss Haldane's hands were locked in front of her, her features were as quiet as though she were sitting for her photograph; her face was whiter than usual, and her strange eyes had a staring look. I thought the expression of the eyes unnatural—she looked as though she were about to cry.

Fully five minutes passed, and then Mr. Haldane called out in a clear, musical voice—

"I have received the impression. Judge, please, if I am correct, I presume I must



I determined to watch the experiment with the utmost vigilance.

thank Sir Penn for this copybook sentence. It is as follows:—

If you are using your powers for fraudulent purposes, beware!

"Am I right, Sir Penn?"

The Baronet's reply was to come forward, open his pocket-book and hand the clairvoyant a bank-note for ten pounds. There was quite a sensation in the room.

Later that same evening Sir Penn found an opportunity of seeing me alone.

"What do you think of this affair?" he asked.

"I cannot tell you what I think of it at present," was my answer. "I am certain there is an explanatory cause, although what it is I cannot say. Let me think over everything most carefully. Mr. Haldane leaves to-morrow, does he not?"

"Yes, thank goodness, by an early train.

it is I cannot say. Let me think over everything most carefully. Mr. Haldane leaves to-morrow, does he not?"

"Yes, thank goodness, by an early train. I don't like the man, and I cannot pretend that I do. I wish with all my heart he were not Esther's brother. But let us turn to something more important. To-morrow the trial of my horses takes place. I propose that you and Mrs. Percival and Miss Haldane and myself go to see it. I have a colt named Fritz, who is in for the Derby, and I think I know what he can do. If the trial goes as I expect, Fritz will be the winner. The result of to-morrow's trial must be kept absolutely a secret until I can operate in the market. If I find that the information again gets out—well, I shall cease to keep race-horses."

"I will do my very best for you, Sir Penn," I answered.

When he had left me I went to my room. There I sat down and prepared to think out the enigma. Hour after hour went by, and my busy brain felt on fire. Each moment I became more and more certain that some fraud was being worked by Mr. Haldane, but he could scarcely manage this without an accomplice, and terrible as the idea was,

if there really were foul play his sister must stand in that position toward him. Her hand betrayed her. What her motive was it was impossible to tell, but her hand made crime a contingency not too remote to contemplate.

As I thought and thought I became certain that if only I could discover the key to that evening's performance, I should have also the key to the entire position. I recalled the scene vividly. Miss Haldane's curious and rigid attitude; the peculiar expression in her eyes. I thought of all the ordinary methods of communication—hand language—lip language. Both

were out of the question. Yet the means must have been very sure in order to communicate such a complicated sentence.

Through what channel of the senses could it have passed? Was there any movement? I fixed my memory again, centering my whole thoughts upon it. The eyes! Esther Haldane's eyes had always struck me as wonderful—nay, more, as

odd. They looked very odd as I gazed at them while the clairvoyant at the other end of the room was thinking out the sentence. She had blinked several times, too, as if about to cry.

I arose from my chair. A strange idea had struck me. I lit my candle and went down through the silent house. I entered the



"Suddenly falling on her knees, she burst into a passion of tears."

drawing-room. When I got there I quickly examined the exact places where Haldane and his sister had stood. From the place where Miss Haldane stood her eyes by means of small mirrors could be seen by Haldane. As I thought over this fact the dim outline of a terrible plot began to reveal itself. The human eyes are always naturally winking. Only a code, such as the Morse Telegraphic Code, was necessary. A long closing of the lids for a dash, a short one for a dot, and any communication was possible and could not be detected by the closest observer.

I left the drawing-room, and crossing over to the library, took down a volume of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and carefully copied the letter signs of the Morse Telegraphic Code. I then returned to my room.

During breakfast I watched Miss Haldane, and as I did so the simplicity of the wicked scheme, evidently evolved both by her brother and herself, was borne in upon me.

The guests who were still staying in the house took their departure after breakfast, among those to leave being Karl Haldane. I saw him go up to his sister and kiss her. As he was leaving the room she turned so white that I wondered if she were going to faint.

"Are you ill?" I said. "Does it trouble you so much to part from your brother?"

"We are very much attached," she said, her lips quivering.

"I have remarked that," I answered.

She flashed an excited glance at me.

At that instant Sir Penn came into the room. He went up to her, and laid his hand affectionately on her shoulder.

"We are due on the Downs at eleven," he said. "Miss Marburg is coming too."

"Are you?" asked Miss Haldane.

The information certainly gave her no pleasure.

"I should like to see the horses," was my answer.

Nothing more was said. Mrs. Percival came into the room, the conversation became general, and at about a quarter to eleven we four started for our walk. It was a glorious morning, sunny and warm. Nevertheless, our conversation flagged and we walked on for some time in silence.

At length we reached the racing ground,

and Sir Penn showed us a good position to witness the trial, in which some dozen horses were to take part. Mr. Martin, the trainer, and our four selves took up our position at the intended winning post on a little rise among some furze bushes. Sir Penn drew out his watch.

"It is exactly midday," he said.

"Here they come!" cried Miss Haldane excitedly, and in a few moments, with a thunder of hoofs, the animals galloped past.

"Just what I thought, Martin," said the baronet. "If Fritz doesn't bring home the Blue Ribbon this year he is certain to be in the first three."

"And if he is you will be richer than ever," said Miss Haldane, laying her hand on his arm. "Do go, Miss Marburg, to look at the probable winner of the Derby. Take Miss Marburg to see Fritz, won't you?"

Sir Penn and the trainer moved up to where the horses were being pulled up. As Sir Penn did so he turned to me.

"Will you come?" he asked. "Won't you come too, Esther?"

"No," she replied. "I am feeling tired. I will stay with Mrs. Percival."

"Do, my dear," said the elder lady. "We will both sit down on this knoll and wait for you."

I slowly followed Sir Penn, but when I had gone a few steps, I turned aside and pretended to be plucking some small flowers that grew on the edge of the common. My heart was beating almost to suffocation. I feared that Miss Haldane would observe me, and that I should lose a possible opportunity. But she had evidently forgotten my existence. Mrs. Percival had opened a newspaper and was beginning to read. Sir Penn and the trainer were more than a hundred yards away. I stood on her left. She rose slowly to her feet and gazed out steadily across the down in the direction of an old ruined barn some six hundred yards off. I quickly took out pencil and paper, and, keeping my eyes fixed on hers, marked the movement of the long and short closure of her lids. That slip of paper I have still, and this is the copy as I took it down:

F R I T Z W O N T R I A L

... ..

Without a moment's pause or giving myself time to think I rushed up to her side.

"What are you doing?" I cried.

My voice startled her. She flashed round, fury in her eyes.

"Fritz won trial," I said, as I deciphered the dots and dashes from the code.

She stared wildly at me for one moment, then suddenly falling on her knees she burst into a passion of tears. At this instant Sir Penn came up.

"Esther!" he cried, "what is the matter?"

"This is the matter," I answered. "The

Nothing else greatly mattered at that moment, but the word was given.

"Look!" I cried after a few moments.

Two grooms on their horses had just headed off the figure of a man who was running with all his might toward the railway station. It was, I could see at a glance, Mr. Karl Haldane. A moment later he was brought to the spot where we stood. His face was also white, but very hard and determined looking.

"Come, Esther, old girl," he said, speaking in an almost rough tone, and pulling the weeping girl to her feet. "You did your best. We must all fail at times. I presume," he added, "that Esther and I have failed, but will you explain why you sent two men to interfere with my liberty, Sir Penn?"

"I think I can best explain," I said.

I then proceeded to give step by step the means I had taken to discover their secret. When I had finished speaking there was silence. After a pause, which was the most impressive I ever endured, Esther Haldane approached Sir Penn.

"You can, of course, arrest both me and my husband," she said.

"Your husband?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Karl Haldane is my husband. I have played you the meanest trick a woman can play a man. I tried first to win your love, secondly to win your money. I succeeded in the first. I failed in the latter. All

that I have done I have done for my husband, the only man on God's earth whom I really love. I love him so well that I can even go under for him. You can take what steps you please to punish us both. Come, Karl, our game is up."



"Two grooms on their horses had just headed off the figure of a man who was running with all his might toward the railway station."

plot is discovered. Prevent any one from leaving that barn!"

Sir Penn's face turned white as death. I saw that he guessed the worst. The girl to whom he was engaged, and whom he loved with all his heart, had betrayed him.

THE TOLERATION OF COUNT KINSKY

A Romance of the Haute Police

By L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace

WITH A DRAWING AS FRONTISPIECE BY HERMAN PFEIFFER



AS soon as I heard the news that Isabel Somerset was engaged to Count Sergius Kinsky, I was eager to renew my acquaintance with her. Sir Edward Somerset had been a great friend of my father's in the old days, and their property joined ours in Hampshire. I remembered Isabel then as a dark-eyed, pretty girl of twelve, who had looked upon me as a sort of elder brother. Her father had obtained an appointment as the First Secretary in the Russian Embassy at St. Petersburg, and after remaining there for seven years, had now just retired and returned home.

I was actually writing a note to Lady Somerset, when to my surprise I received one from Isabel herself.

"DEAR GUY -

"I have only just heard by chance that you are in London, and that you, of all peo-

ple, have taken up the profession of a Chiropracticist. Imagine my surprise. What have you done it for?

"When can you come to see us? If you are free to-morrow, mother wants you to come and dine here at eight. By the way, Count Kinsky, to whom I am engaged, wants particularly to see you, and was going to call on you to-morrow without knowing of our old friendship, so the meeting will be in every way lucky. He will be here to-morrow night, so come if you can.

"Yours very truly,

"ISABEL SOMERSET."

At the appointed hour on the following evening I found myself at the Somersets' house, where a warm welcome awaited me. I certainly should not have recognized Isabel had I passed her in the street, but I should as surely have noticed her, for her face, pale and somewhat thin when she was a child, had now blossomed into the radiant beauty of a woman.

Amongst the guests were two Russian gentlemen, one, Count Kinsky the man to whom Isabel was engaged, a tall, very dark man, rather old, I thought, to be the husband of so young a girl, the other a short, beady-eyed, thin man, with a heavy, carefully waxed moustache. He was extremely affable in his manners, spoke excellent English, and was evidently a great friend of Count Kinsky's. His name was M. Charkoff.

It was not until dinner was over that I had the chance of a quiet chat with Isabel in the conservatory.

"Well, Guy," she said, "this is like old times. Would you have known me?"

"Yes, and no," I answered. "You are in some ways improved out of recognition."

She blushed and looked down; presently she said in a gentle tone: "I am very happy, Guy. I think I am the happiest girl in the world. But I have so much to say to you. It is the oddest thing that Count Kinsky should be in England just now. I don't suppose you know, but he is one of the heads of the Haute Police, as it is called in Russia, and the chief of the section that guards the persons of the Royal House. Even I do not know what is the nature of his mission to England. He is anxious to have a talk with you later in the evening. I wonder what you will think of him."

She looked at me critically. "You are tremendously changed," she continued, "and it was odd of you to become a mere fortune-teller."

"I don't call myself that," I replied, in an annoyed tone. "It is true that I practice the art of the Palmist, or, in other words, the Chiromancist, because I have always found the subject of deepest interest to me; but I have money enough, and, although I confess that I sometimes accept fees, I never count on them; my work in itself is of sufficient interest to me, for I believe in it. I live with a friend, a person whom you would consider very curious. He is a Persian, although he has lived most of his life in England. He has made forensic medicine his special study, and he is called in as a specialist in many difficult poisoning cases. You shall see him some day. Celso Nevares and I understand each other, and what more can anyone want?"

"I can only repeat that you grow stran-

ger each moment, Guy," was the girl's answer. "As though mere friendship could content anyone! And you to take up with a horrible Persian!"

"He is not horrible! He is a gentleman in the best sense of the word. He and I were school friends, first at Rugby, and we were at the same College at Oxford. No two men could be happier."

"And you both believe in the occult sciences? Oh, I hate that sort of thing."

"I am afraid we do believe in them," I replied, and I turned my eyes and glanced at her face.

I saw that she was sensitive and nervous beyond her wont; in fact, highly strung to the last degree.

"Love is a higher thing than friendship," she said, suddenly.

"Well, I disagree; but we won't discuss philosophy. Let us return to your affairs; you say Count Kinsky's presence in London is a mystery, even to you?"

"Indeed it is," she answered, brightening up. "I don't dare to ask about it. He wants to consult you, too; I am very curious about that."

At that moment a deep voice sounded behind us, and, turning, we saw that Count Kinsky had come up.

"I am going to take the liberty of breaking up your *tête-à-tête*, Mr. Elphinstone," he said to me. "I know, Isabel, you won't mind. May I have a few moments' private conversation with you, Mr. Elphinstone? We shall, I believe, find the library unoccupied."

We moved away together.

"This coincidence of your knowing the Somersets," he began, as soon as we found ourselves in the library, "is very lucky, and renders my business easier than if I had come to you as a stranger. I have heard from Isabel that you deal in the occult sciences, and more particularly in the study of the human hand. I have a friend who is so highly strung, and, alas! so sensitive and nervous, that he has implored me to get a professional to read his hand. You, without being exactly a professional, in the ordinary sense of the word, will exactly suit my case. Will you come with me to see my friend? And will you do this act of kindness on certain conditions?"

"What are your conditions?" I asked.

He fixed his keen, bright blue eyes on my face.

"I act as agent to the gentleman in question," was his next remark.

"With regard to the conditions?"

"Yes. The terms are these. You accompany me to-night to a house somewhere in the suburbs of London,—where, I am not prepared to say. You will enter my brougham and drive with me to that house, and you will kindly submit to the fact that all the blinds will be down. You will not be able to see the face of your client. He will stand behind two curtains, and put out his hands for you to inspect. If you care to accept a fee of fifty guineas, you will be doing us a tremendous favor."

"I would prefer to go with you as a friend."

"Please yourself," he remarked, abruptly, "but remember that the concealment of all identity is the main object, and no compromise can be made to this condition. Do you accept it?"

"If I met you as a stranger, I should not; but, as you are betrothed to my old friend, Isabel Somerset, I have not the least hesitation in going with you. I am at your service."

The Count rose at once; we returned to the drawing-room, and took our leave.

At the door Count Kinsky's brougham was waiting. The blinds were all down. As we drove, the Count hardly spoke, and I was left free to speculate on the identity of my forthcoming client.

By and by we entered an avenue through gates, and the carriage drew up at a large house. The Count alighted first, and pressed an electric bell. Almost immediately the door was opened by a tall African of herculean proportions. He nodded to the Count, and admitted us both into the hall, where the only light was one small gas jet, turned down to scarcely more than a minute point of blue flame.

"Now, Mr. Elphinstone," exclaimed the Count, "will you follow me?"

We went along the hall for some twenty steps in a straight line; here some bolts were drawn back and we descended a few steps; another bolted door was passed, and the next instant I found myself standing in a low-ceilinged, well-lighted room, handsomely furnished, the carpet being of thick pile as soft as grass. At the further end of the room hung a pair of drawn curtains of dark velvet. I was told to approach these and to seat myself in a chair, which

was placed close to them. On either side of me, slightly in front, the Count and the negro placed themselves.

"You clearly understand our conditions?" said the Count, speaking gravely and in a low voice.

"I understand," was my answer.

He uttered some words in Russian which I could not follow, and immediately two hands were thrust out between the division of the curtains. I looked at them with curiosity; they were large, with knotted fingers, and were much stained, as though the owner were accustomed to developing photograph plates. But what they chiefly denoted was a character of powerful will, and they were beyond doubt, I saw at a glance, the hands of a scientist.

I at once commenced my horoscope of the fate of the invisible owner, and at several points of my analysis I could see the hands tremble, and now and then a quick-caught breath was audible.

Suddenly I ceased, for I caught my own breath. I had just observed a distinct and ominous mark. There was a fatal star on Mercury, pointing down and across the Heart line towards the Life line. It was a rare and sinister sign. The right hand corroborated the significance of the left, but just for a moment I hesitated to read its meaning.

"Well, is that all?" whispered the Count beside me.

"No, there is more to tell."

"Speak," said the Count, "we want the entire truth."

The hands were now held out firmly; the owner of them was evidently preparing himself for the worst.

"I see here," I continued, "a terrible mark. It means, according to my experience, assassination, probably by poisoning."

If a bomb had been hurled into the room the effect could not have been more startling. The hands disappeared instantly; there was a cry from behind the curtains; Count Kinsky seized my shoulders, pushed me back into the chair and stared down into my face. On his own was an expression of horror. The negro passed swiftly behind the curtains; a small bell sounded twice, then, before I was aware, I was hurried from the room without a word.

A minute or two later I found myself in

another room at some distance from that in which I had told the fortunes of the mysterious owner of the hands, and face to face with the count. He had, beyond doubt, received a shock of a severe character.

"Sit down for a moment, Mr. Elphinstone," he said. "You have startled me and my friend by your daring and extraordinary words. I told you to-night I did not believe in your art. I wish to God I could strengthen my skepticism. The whole thing is horribly uncanny; do you really mean that you saw that awful sign?"

"I read the hand according to the interpretations of its marks," I replied. "I am sorry, Count Kinsky, to have disturbed you, but I only did what you asked me to do."

He suddenly rose from the seat he had taken, knelt down beside me and held out his own hands.

"I cannot resist it," he said. "I must yield; it may be weak of me, but I cannot help it. Tell me what you see here."

I took his hands and looked at them.

"Speak as freely and openly as you have done before. Conceal nothing," he said.

"You, too, are in danger," I said as I bent over his open palms; "but there is no definite sign of any special catastrophe. You have enemies, but you will overcome them. Your future should be happy."

The strained and anxious expression immediately faded from his face.

"It is enough," he said with a sigh.

"My skepticism for your art returns with your prophecy of my fate."

I looked at him in amazement.

"I cannot explain. I must only thank you for what you have done. And now I will see you home. You must again submit to the blinds being down in the brougham; you are not to attempt to penetrate further into the mystery in which you bore a part to-night."

On reaching home I found my friend Nevares sitting in an arm-chair and half asleep. He was a remarkable personality. He had all the beauty that the best of the East can produce, and all the refinement that can be gained by an English education of the highest order.

He roused himself sleepily as I drew a chair near, and I could not help relating to him my experience.

"You will get into trouble one of these fine days, Guy," was his final remark; "but I must confess that this is an interesting case. I expect your nervous friend has had a good scare in Russia and bolted to England. Still, it is very odd."

A few days later I met Isabel Somerset. She was full of curiosity to know the nature of my interview with Count Kinsky. I told her, however, that I could tell her nothing.

"I understand," she said, with a little shiver. "Guy, I have always given you my confidence. I wish these next few months would pass. Tell me this at least,—is he in danger?"

Again I had to plea the vow of secrecy, and I began to wish that I had never had anything to do with the case.

It was exactly four days after my interview with Isabel, and the time was two o'clock in the afternoon. Nevares was standing at one of the windows.

"By Jove! That was a near shave!" he cried, excitedly.

"What?" I said, hurrying across the room.

"That hansom. The horse came galloping through the Inn archway, and the rim of the wheel just grazed the curb stone. But look; he is pulling up here. Oh, it's certainly one of your clients, someone you have been driving mad by your ominous prophecies."

I watched a tall figure leap from the cab, and saw at a glance that it was no other than Count Kinsky. The next moment he burst into the room, his face was livid with excitement, and his mouth twitched nervously.

"He is dead!" burst from his dry lips.

"My client?" I exclaimed.

"Yes; it happened this morning. He was poisoned. I have not come to see you, Mr. Elphinstone, I have come to see Mr. Nevares. I have been sent here by Anderson, from Scotland Yard; Anderson, the analyst. He asked me to come and fetch you to help him, Mr. Nevares; you will come at once. The case is absolutely inexplicable."

"Before I promise to come I must hear the details," said Nevares. "I already understand from my friend, Mr. Elphinstone, that the case is one of mystery. I presume the death you have spoken of will now allow that to be explained."

"Alas ! it does," exclaimed the Count, looking keenly at the Persian.

I waited in breathless interest.

"You can do nothing, Mr. Nevares, without knowing as much as I can tell you. First of all, I must explain who I am. I am the Chief, or rather was, until this morning, of the Haute Police, in St. Petersburg. I came to London, a short time ago, charged by the Czar with an extremely delicate mission, in company with my colleague Charkoff. The mission was this : You are, of course, aware that there is little doubt that our nation will soon be in conflict with Japan, both by land and sea, and our secret agents have learned that a Japanese chemist has recently discovered a new and terrifically powerful explosive, for use not only in shells and torpedoes, but also for floating mines. The preparation is unknown in Europe. Long and carefully conducted inquiries elicited a certain amount of knowledge as to its composition, but not sufficient for our arsenals to work on, and the preparation of it, or rather the discovery of its ingredients, was entrusted to our greatest chemist, Professor Golonski. It was not long before the Japanese agents got wind of it, and, during the Professor's researches in St. Petersburg, no less than three attempts were made upon his life. The necessity for absolute secrecy in his work prevented our calling in any other chemists to aid him, and on him alone devolved the task on which such tremendous issues hung."

"You mean that it is Professor Golonski who is now dead?" I could not help interrupting.

"Yes, he died by poison ; and his work is on the eve of completion. Now all is lost. So careful was he that he did not trust his secrets to paper, and there is nothing, therefore, for any other chemist to work on successfully. But, listen, now, both of you."

The Count's excited manner left him, and his professional calm returned.

"By the Czar's command Professor Golonski left Russia for England, under the care of Charkoff and myself. Our police communicated with yours, and, as a friendly nation, I will say, that their kindness and watchfulness have been more than praiseworthy. A house in St. John's Wood was taken, and a laboratory fitted up according to Golonski's orders. From

the moment he entered that house, he has never left it, night or day, and all that time he has been under the special observation of not only myself and Charkoff, but also one of the most acute detectives of Scotland Yard.

"Now, I must tell you what this means to me. On the success of this one man, lay the fortunes of the whole Russian Empire. The Czar's own words were these, and they admit of no misinterpretation or equivocation, especially as I am not viewed by him with favor, and never have been.

"Golonski will go to England to conclude his researches. Kinsky and Charkoff will hold themselves responsible for his life. If either or both fail in their trust, Siberia for life will be the penalty. If Golonski succeeds, not only he receives his immense reward, but his two guardians also, are liberally compensated for the dangers and anxieties they have run."

"Need I say, that in view of such a ukase, all precautions were taken. Any possibility of personal violence was out of the question ; for accident or disease, we could not be held responsible. Poison, in some secret form, was our only fear. Imagine, then, Mr. Elphinstone, what your strange words meant to him and to me. You will see now, how your reading of my hand relieved my apprehensions ; for, if he died from poison, I, or at any rate Charkoff, must also have done so. Each morsel of food, or drop of drink, that passed his lips, was tasted first by either Charkoff or myself, and we took duty for this, week by week. This week, the duty was mine. This morning, therefore, as usual, I prepared his coffee for him to drink. Half of the coffee prepared for him, I also, drank ; the remaining half was kept warm for an hour. I felt perfectly well, after my portion. He drank his cup as usual ; in less than a minute he complained of feeling faint, and asked for brandy. Before I could get it, he fell from the chair to the floor, *dead !*"

Nevares, who, during the narration of this extraordinary story had remained motionless, his chin resting on his hand, his eyes fixed on Count Kinsky, now leaped to his feet. Under the ivory skin of his face glowed a dusky red tinge.

"Was he a healthy man in every way ? Any heart disease ?"

"None."

"Did he wash his hands after using his chemicals the previous night, or were his hands washed before taking his coffee?"

"He always observed the most scrupulous cleanliness."

"Were the windows of the room open?"

"No, shut."

"Had he consulted a dentist lately?"

"Not for many years; I know for a fact."

"You brought him the coffee; did he drink it in your presence?"

"Yes."

"Have you any reason for supposing that he would wish to commit suicide?"

"Absolutely none."

"You felt no ill effects after drinking your portion of the coffee and milk?"

"Absolutely none."

"So that if poison is found in the coffee, it must have been put in after you had taken your tasting and protecting draught?"

"There can be no doubt about that," and as Count Kinsky spoke his lips were very white.

There was silence for a moment.

"I can only say I am very sorry for you, Count Kinsky; your case is apparently a bad one; but do not despair yet, until complete investigation is made. It is all incomprehensible; but come, come at once."

Kinsky turned and grasped my hand.

"You know, Elphinstone, what this means to me? I allude to—Isabel."

I returned the pressure.

"God help you!" I muttered. "But I am thankful you have Nevares on your side. Trust him."

In another moment they had gone.

It was late that evening when Nevares returned. I could see by his face that the news was bad.

"Well?" I exclaimed.

"It is not well at all," was his low answer. "In both the coffee and the milk, and also in the stomach of the late chemist, we have found a powerful vegetable alkaloid poison. To-morrow I shall know what it is exactly. The amount is large. Had it been in the stuff when Kinsky took his share he would certainly have died as quickly as Golonski. It was therefore put in after Kinsky drank his part. Now the cup never left sight of Kinsky—so he says, and we have no reason to doubt his statement—and he swears it to be quite impossible for Golonski to

have put anything into the cup, as he drank it directly it was brought to him. I have examined and cross-examined Kinsky to the most minute details, and I can only say, what any jury would say in such a case, that Kinsky put the poison into the milk before mixing the cup for Golonski. There is no escape; some heavy bribe, the deed done almost before he was aware, the fatal consequence. Anyhow Kinsky will have to return to Russia, and there, from his own account, he will meet with little mercy. He will never be seen again."

"Good God!" I cried. "It is impossible! You know his relation to Isabel Somerset. His innocence must be proved, and you, Celso, must do it."

"That, my dear Guy, is impossible," was his only answer.

I shall never forget the next few days. Events passed at intervals like phantoms of a hideous nightmare. First there was the inquest in camera, by the request of the Russian authorities; then there was the quiet arrest of Count Kinsky on suspicion, by the Czar's request, and an order for his return to Russia. This latter, I learnt, the Russian Autocrat had no power to enforce, but Kinsky himself signified his intention of returning and facing the consequences, brave man that he was.

The last night came; he was to leave under escort of the English police for Paris at eight o'clock the next day. By special request, which was granted, Isabel was to go to the house in St. John's Wood to see him and to bid him farewell.

That last night I went to my room at nine o'clock and tried to sleep, but only dozed at intervals. I could hear Nevares pacing up and down in the sitting-room.

Then I dozed again, but suddenly started erect, trembling in every limb, for my name rang through the room in Celso's voice. I leaped up and rushed into the sitting-room. It was nearly three in the morning.

"Dress quickly; ring up a hansom, Guy," he shouted.

"But, why?" I cried, thinking he had gone mad.

"Obey!" he thundered. "I think I shall be able to save him."

He turned and thrust some bottles into a bag. Ten minutes later a hansom cab was taking us at a rapid gallop to St. John's Wood. Nevares never spoke a word. After some telegraphic messages to Scotland

Yard, we were at last admitted to the room where Kinsky and Isabel were together, and were allowed a private interview.

The Persian's excitement now vanished into the dead past.

"Count Kinsky," he said, "I come to you to offer you a means of escape from your sorrow,—a sorrow past the power of words to lighten. I have considered your case night and day. The details, we all know; and, we also know, that treachery has been used to accomplish the death of Golonski by poisoning by Japaconitine, the most deadly alkaloid of *Aconitum Fischeri* grown in Japan. I do not believe you are guilty. Now let me explain.

"It is well known by all chemists, and all members of the medical profession, that if a person takes for some time a small and ever-increasing quantity of a poison, his system becomes what is called *tolerated* to that particular poison, and it ceases to have a toxic effect. Witness the result of alcohol, tobacco, morphine, cocaine, on their devotees. Hardened habitués to these poisons can, and do, take quantities sufficient to kill anyone not accustomed to them. My belief is, that you have been secretly given for a long time in your food, small but gradually increasing quantities of Japaconitine, and your system is so tolerated that you can take a quantity which, though it would have no effect on you, would kill a person *not* tolerated to it."

A cry started from Kinsky's lips.

"Wait!" went on the Persian. "Listen yet a little. In order to prove your innocence, there is only one way. I put before you, therefore, two alternatives. One,—your leaving England in four hours' time for Russia, to die, or to go to a living death, leaving all that makes life worth caring for, and also the woman you love, and this forever; the other alternative is to drink, now, in my presence, in the presence of Miss Somerset, and that of my friend, Guy Elphinstone, and, also, in the presence of the two detectives who have you in charge, a quantity of this poison, which, if you have been tolerated, will have no more effect than it had when you took your share of the dead man's coffee and milk, and will prove your innocence conclusively; but which, if my theory is wrong, will kill you immediately, as it killed Golonski."

He ceased, and for a few moments no one spoke. The ingenuity of the theory,

the appalling consequences, if it should be wrong, the urgency of immediately putting such an awful theory to the test, the impossibility of any escape from one of the two alternatives had stunned us. Once more the Persian broke the silence.

"I offer you the means of proving your innocence at the risk of sudden death. I, in the event of being wrong, shall be sent to penal servitude for life. We stand together, you see, to win or lose all. You, are of the West; I, of the East; I should have no hesitation were I in your position."

Here, for the first time, Isabel spoke.

"Take the draught, Sergius," she whispered.

"I will"; he answered. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Had you not better leave the room, Isabel?" I exclaimed.

"No," she answered. "I stay with Sergius; whatever happens, I shall be at his side."

Meanwhile, Nevares poured something into a phial, and then muttered a few words in Persian. Kinsky took the phial, and said a word of prayer. His face was like death; but, his hand was steady. He raised the glass to his lips, tossed the contents down his throat, reeled for a moment, and would have fallen against the sofa unless Nevares had caught him. His hand was upon Kinsky's wrist. I uttered a cry of horror; Nevares was wrong. Kinsky was dead.

"He has only fainted," whispered Nevares. "Keep up your courage, Miss Somerset, his heart is beating well. He *was* tolerated. I was right."

In a few minutes time Kinsky opened his eyes to look upon the girl he loved, kneeling by his side.

The next day the full truth came out, in a startling manner. Charkoff, the man who had accompanied Kinsky in order to guard Golonski, committed suicide. He left behind him a full confession. He was bribed by Japanese Agents to tolerate Kinsky with small doses of Japaconitine, and then, to put a large dose in the milk to kill Golonski, and thus throw the blame on the Russian Minister.

The great explosive was never discovered; but Isabel and Count Kinsky were married before the latter returned to St. Petersburg, now fully restored to the favor of the Czar.